Academic Persistence in Further Education: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of the Experience of Students who have Considered Withdrawal

Thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

University of Stirling, Division of Education

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October 2021

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Copyright and Declaration

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Declaration

I declare that I have composed this thesis myself and that it embodies the results of my own research. Where appropriate, I have acknowledged the nature and extent of work carried out in collaboration with others included in the thesis.

Signed,

Nicola McIntosh

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my supervisors, Kevin Brosnan, Sarah Galloway and Richard Dockrell. Your patience with me while I attempted to make sense of the messy business of human experience was appreciated.

To my family, particularly Ally, thank you for your support and endless cups of tea and coffee. Our next 'project' will be very different and probably just as challenging, but I know you will support me just as much as you have done with this one. To Heidegger, my PhD cat, you entered my life just as I was beginning this project, and you left it today, three weeks after the Viva. You haven't just left footprints on my heart; you have literally left them all over my thesis. Sleep tight my baby boy.

Finally, I extend my heartfelt gratitude to the colleges and participants that took part in the study. Without your involvement, the project would have been impossible. Your experiences of persistence are inspiring, and I hope my project does them justice. You have helped illuminate the complexity of persisting because of and despite the challenges you faced, and I believe the future of further education will benefit from your openness and frankness.

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List of Abbreviations

EI	Emotional Intelligence
EQI	Emotional Quotient Inventory
FE	Further Education
HE	Higher Education
HEI	Higher Education Institution
HN	Higher National
HNC	Higher National Certificate
HND	Higher National Diploma
ICT	Information and Communications Technology
IPA	Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis
SFC	Scottish Funding Council

Abstract

Academic persistence is a common phenomenon within all areas of education. Retention statistics consistently draw our attention to withdrawal and completion rates in universities and colleges, yet the persistence demonstrated by our students is seldom acknowledged. Research has proposed many underlying reasons for students' withdrawal or completion and suggests various measures institutions can implement to reduce withdrawal and increase completion. Research pays less attention to academic persistence as a phenomenon, and there is currently relatively little research about the lived experiences of those who have considered withdrawal but persisted with their studies.

Research tends to focus on Higher Education, yet the phenomenon is equally prevalent in Further Education. Further Education accounted for almost a fifth of the 244,714 full-time students enrolled in Scotland in 2019/20 (HESA 2021; SFC 2021a). Its underrepresentation in the research makes it a valuable yet untapped field of study. This thesis investigates the lived experiences of Further Education students in Scotland, focusing on those who have considered withdrawal but persisted with their studies, to establish and present new knowledge about the academic persistence phenomenon.

The thesis takes a phenomenological approach. It uses Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis to foreground the lived experiences of 11 participants from five campuses of Scottish Colleges. In-depth, semi-structured interviews with each participant were recorded, transcribed, and analysed in detail to develop four key themes: 'a disrupted sense of self', 'the push and pull of motivation', 'the ambiguity of agency', and 'emotions and coping while considering withdrawal'. Each theme revealed psychological, sociological, and organisational elements, demonstrating the complexity of the lived experience and how a multi-dimensional approach is crucial to the study of academic persistence.

Chapter One:
Introduction

Chapter One: Introduction

Introduction

This thesis seeks to reveal, understand, and present the phenomenon of academic persistence within Further Education (FE). Before beginning this study, I had experienced many years of post-compulsory studying in Higher Education (HE), from Higher National Certificate (HNC) to Master's Degree Level. However, I had never studied at the FE level. I have spent almost two decades working with both FE and HE students in various roles, including as a lecturer, a member of support staff, and a manager. My interest in the topic stemmed from my personal experience of withdrawing from university and my experiences of teaching and supporting students who have withdrawn or considered withdrawing from their studies. During this PhD project, I considered withdrawing on several occasions.

In 1996, at the end of my first year of university, I withdrew from my course. I find, 25 years later, that my students often withdraw or consider withdrawing from their studies. The cases vary, are seldom straightforward, and the eventual outcomes are often unpredictable. When students withdraw from education, personal effects can be long-lasting and far-reaching (Dennison 2020; Faas *et al.* 2018; Hoeschler and Backes-Gellner 2019; McCaul *et al.* 1992). My initial research interest was in the underlying causes of student withdrawal and the measures available to alleviate the 'problem'. However, I quickly became aware of the extensive research already available in that area. In contrast, I found a dearth of studies attempting to reveal and understand the lived experiences of students who persist despite considering withdrawal. Examining the available literature, I was surprised at the lack of research relating to FE students, and this formed the basis for my study.

This introductory chapter outlines the thesis, its research context, and the study's aims. It outlines the research questions and briefly introduces the chosen methodology. Finally, it outlines the thesis structure and defines relevant terminology.

1.1 Research Context

The last few years have seen Scottish colleges go through substantial changes. With the mergers of Scotland's existing colleges to create fewer, larger regional colleges came cuts to funding and cuts to staff and student numbers. College populations have changed in profile, with fewer students overall but higher numbers in the 16-19 age group. As this particular age group's success rates are reportedly lower than other age groups, the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) points out that colleges are now facing a demographic that has changed and is less likely to succeed

(Education Scotland 2014). Strategies such as Developing the Young Workforce (DYW) and the recently published Youth Guarantee aim to support Scotland's youths by preparing them for work and giving opportunities for employment, education, or training to every young person. Those opportunities alone, however, will not ensure young people can always succeed in their educational journeys.

Over the past decade, student success for full-time FE has improved. However, with fewer students gaining entry to these college courses, the need to retain those students intensifies - the loss of one student has greater statistical and economic significance when overall numbers are fewer than in previous years. Students themselves may not be aware of or concerned with the importance of retention, but the pressure on staff to ensure that their students do not withdraw adds another layer of complexity to an already demanding job. The latest results for Scotland's full-time FE sector (2019/20) present a picture that has improved since 2009/10, but which remains relatively stable; with student completion having risen from 72% in 2009/10 to 78.8% in 2019/20 (see Appendix A). This statistic shows a slight improvement, but it still leaves almost 10,000 full-time FE students failing to complete their courses, based on the enrolment of 45,876 students in 2019/20 (SFC 2011, 2021b).

Financially, student withdrawal from courses affects both the colleges themselves and the public more widely. As colleges do not receive funding for the students who withdraw 'early' (before 25% of their course time has elapsed), colleges could potentially lose out on substantial sums. To overcome this potential loss, colleges over recruit, and this has ensured that they have met targets despite withdrawals for the past 20 years (SFC 2021c). The colleges do receive funding for students who withdraw before completion but after the early withdrawal date has passed. The SFC gives this funding, amounting to approximately £4,300 per full-time student, to the college despite the withdrawal. Withdrawn students are difficult to replace. While many may see the benefit of smaller class sizes running with more resources as a result of withdrawal , as lecturers' available time per student increases, others see wasted resources and public money that the government could otherwise reallocate (Ashour 2019; Cannistrà *et al.* 2020).

The numbers may be concerning, as they amount to significant public funds regardless of how we view them. Still, for many individuals who withdraw, the financial impact on the colleges is irrelevant. Consequences for these students can be far-reaching and long-lasting, with lower lifetime earnings and poorer health than for graduates (Baum and Ma 2007; Berlingieri and Bolz 2020; Rumberger 2020). For some, this will have been their first foray into post-compulsory education. Regardless of how quickly or otherwise they withdraw, we should consider what they achieved in that time and what we can do to support future students.

In both the USA and the UK, most retention studies have focused on HE students and institutions, making retention one of the most widely studied phenomena in HE, with considerable research also relating to doctoral students (Nalbone *et al.* 2016). However, there is a noticeable shortfall in the literature about FE in the UK (Husband and Jones 2019; Solvason and Elliott 1996). While the majority of literature relates to HE, there has been considerable research within FE. However, much of this research has been small-scale and unpublished and, as a result, repetitive (Martinez 2001). In response to the need for research within colleges, the launch of a new Research and Enhancement Centre by College Development Network (CDN) in April 2021 and the College Action Inquiry Research Network Journal (CAIRN) launched in January 2021 provide new spaces to initiate and collate research in FE. While neither the Research Centre nor Journal aims specifically to address retention research, both offer a platform to encourage and disseminate. There are many areas in which retention is comparable across HE, doctoral studies, and FE, but we must bear in mind that there can be differences between higher and further education students. HE and doctoral courses typically last between three and six years, in contrast to the one-year courses offered at the FE level. Therefore, many HE and doctoral studies of retention have dealt with students who have discontinued their studies after year one. In contrast, the current study will look solely at students completing their one entire course year. Research suggests that FE courses typically attract different types of students to those attracted by HE. For example, FE students are often older than students in HE institutions. With different entrance qualifications, they are more likely to live locally, more often in areas of deprivation, and with commitments to work and family (King and Widdowson 2012). These differences point to a need for a study that looks specifically at FE students to understand their experiences.

The majority of studies have focused on self-report surveys and quantitative measures of students' variables to produce predictions. However, as is common throughout retention research, any less than 100% response rates could lessen the validity of such measures, as the self-selection by those responding could lead to distorted results (Draper 2008). Thomas (2012) suggests that around 40% of students consider withdrawing from their courses. However, student retention studies are often unclear about whether this is true of the students they are surveying or interviewing. We cannot tell from these past studies whether participants have ever considered withdrawing and have persisted despite this, which means that understanding the levels of persistence demonstrated is impossible. Instead, the current study makes withdrawal consideration a central theme, allowing us to examine the complexities and nuances of student persistence.

1.2 Aims of the Study and Research Questions

This study aims to understand the lived experience of students who have considered withdrawing. Focusing on the individual and personal experiences of students who have lived through unique

yet sometimes similar circumstances that led them to consider withdrawal, it aims to demonstrate the complex array of lived experiences and to illuminate the thought processes and situations in which they have found themselves. Using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), the thesis aims to uncover the nature of academic persistence, focusing on individual experiences to answer the following research questions:

1. What is the lived experience of students who have considered withdrawal but persisted with their studies?

2. How does this experience develop over time?

3. What changes to professional practice, if any, arise from the study?

Using IPA, the study provides detailed insight into the students' personal and academic lives as they recount their desire to leave college for various reasons, explaining how they felt at the time. The lens of interpretative phenomenology helps us foreground and examine their emotions, strategies, and struggles. In turn, we can appreciate the depth and detail of their stories, allowing us to begin to unpick the academic persistence phenomenon.

As the thesis seeks to understand the 'lived experience' of its participants, some clarification of the term is warranted. For this, I turn to its German translation - *'erlebnis'*. Frechette *et al.* (2020) explain how *erlebnis* brings together the meanings of *erleben* ("to be still alive when something happens"), and *erlebte* ("the permanent content of what is experienced", Gadamer 2004, p. 53). From this, we can understand lived experience not simply as an event or an occurrence, but instead as something significant that we interpret and attempt to make sense of, the effects of which are lasting and impactful. Importantly, this lived experience involves a dynamic process, where the participants are not simply passive in its observation; they are active in its creation.

The following section provides definitions for some other important and potentially ambiguous concepts as they are used throughout the thesis.

1.3 Definition of Terms and Concepts

Agency

Agency can be understood as a person's 'will and capacity to act'. This simplistic view, while useful as a starting point, ignores individuals' circumstances, experiences, connections to others, and the effects of time. The current study adopts this more nuanced and complex view of agency, drawing on Socio-Ecological Agency to attend to individuals' ever-changing will and capacity to act within their personal, organisational, and cultural constraints.

Belonging

The term 'belonging', as it is used in the findings and discussion section of this study, refers to the sense of acceptance, inclusion, and connection. This sense of belonging is a subjective perception linked both to academic and social aspects of college, and relationships with both staff and fellow students. Throughout the study, I do not distinguish between belonging in an academic or social sense; instead, I use the term to suggest an overall feeling, regardless of specific context.

Further Education and Higher Education (in Scotland)

This study focuses on full-time Further Education (FE) in Scottish Colleges. Colleges in Scotland offer both Further and Higher Education (HE), both on a part- and full-time basis. Approximately 58% of all full-time activity in colleges is FE-based (Colleges Scotland 2020). FE-level courses include any course below the Higher National Certificate level.

Identity/Sense of Self

This project uses 'identity' and 'sense of self' interchangeably. 'Identity' is used primarily in the literature review as it links to the term's use within published work. 'Sense of self' is used primarily in the findings and discussion to demonstrate a move from accepting 'identity' as something known or accepted about oneself to a belief or understanding of who we might be, linked to our interactions with others and our environment.

Mature student

Student aged 25 and over

Non-traditional student

The meaning of the 'non-traditional student' varies in literature; however, overall, it refers to mature students, students with other full-time responsibilities, first-generation students, and students who took a break from education before entering post-compulsory education.

Traditional student

A student below the age of 25 who enrols in post-compulsory, full-time education directly following their secondary education and without other full-time responsibilities such as work or dependent children.

Withdrawal and Early Withdrawal

Students can withdraw from courses at any point in their academic year. Early withdrawal occurs when a student formally leaves their course before 25% of the course has been delivered.

1.4 Organisation of the Thesis

The thesis spans seven chapters (including this introductory chapter). Each chapter aims to build upon its predecessor to tell the participants' stories without losing sight of the participants' lived experiences.

Chapter Two provides a brief historical overview of retention research and models developed by researchers who continue to be well-cited in current literature. The chapter then focuses on themes occurring in contemporary literature, many of which are grounded in historical literature. Finally, the current literature on FE is discussed, highlighting a gap in the research within which this thesis seeks to work.

Chapter Three describes and provides reasons for the methodology adopted in the project. It discusses elements of phenomenology to situate the study within the field of IPA. The chapter outlines the benefits gained from and the impact of a pilot study. I introduce the participants before concluding the chapter by identifying the project's ethical considerations.

Chapter Four explains the analysis process and outlines the method used for developing themes.

Chapter Five introduces the study's findings. Here, participants' words tell their stories of persistence and provide the detail used in the subsequent theme development.

Chapter Six discusses the themes in detail, demonstrating their links to literature and showing connections with existing theories. It brings the key themes from the study together to address two of the original research questions, revealing the lived experience of academic persistence and how it develops over time.

Chapter Seven concludes the thesis by presenting the phenomenon of academic persistence and highlighting the thesis's suggested contributions to broader academic persistence knowledge. It addresses the third research question by acknowledging implications for professional practice in FE, offering recommendations for further study and presenting my reflections from the study.

Chapter Two:
Literature Review

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Introduction

This chapter introduces the literature on the subject of retention. It demonstrates the extensive history and complex nature of retention research, focusing on the themes often addressed and outlining how those have shifted over the past eight decades of literature. In this section, I discuss the terminology used in literature, introduce early literature relating to student withdrawal theories, and examine more recent literature that demonstrates common presentations of the study of retention. The chapter demonstrates a shift from theoretical studies with distinctly sociological, psychological or organisational viewpoints to increasingly practical studies that integrate various theories.

For over 80 years, academics have debated reasons for, problems with, and models attempting to define and explain student withdrawal from education (see McNeely 1937; Spady 1970; Tinto 1975 and 1999; Bean 1980; Bean and Eaton 2000). With an increase in publications over the 1970s and 80s came a focus on causes and solutions (Ice *et al.* 2011). In general, literature has attempted to answer what we have come to class as typical retention questions – 'why do students withdraw?' and 'how can we stop students withdrawing?', often focusing on institutional practices and interventions (Martinez 2001). Still, despite the plethora of literature, much of which takes its evidence from empirical studies involving students who have indeed withdrawn, rates of withdrawal remain consistently higher than hoped (SFC 2020b).

We see the complexity of conceptualising and measuring retention in educational policies and academic studies worldwide, with uncertainty over what and how to measure. Whether researchers can ever find a model to explain the phenomenon remains to be seen, as the large body of literature continues to grow, demonstrating the complex nature of the subject and the individuals involved (Barbera *et al.* 2020; Gairín *et al.* 2014; Manyanga *et al.* 2017; Mckendry *et al.* 2014). This chapter highlights the complexity, demonstrates how retention research must adapt and move forward, and highlights the lack of lived experience and student voice discussed in retention literature.

2.1 Defining Academic Persistence

Already a complex area of research, the subject is complicated more by the various terms used in its description (Gairín *et al.* 2014; Manyanga *et al.* 2017). While retention research has grown and changed in focus, the terminology has also changed and adapted to suit the subject's needs. McNeely's (1937) term 'mortality', used to describe failure to remain on a course until

graduation, is seldom used in later literature. However, we continue to see the idea that withdrawal is something potentially life-threatening carried throughout later research in Spady and Tinto's use of suicide theory and Spady's classification of some studies as 'autopsy studies'. 'Drop-out', a term used less in current literature, was consistently used throughout the latter half of the 20th century, and typically described students who had withdrawn before completion. However, as research increased, the term 'stop-out' was added to the list of student retention vocabulary. Drop-outs were those who withdrew and never returned, while stop-outs were those who withdrew, took time out, and later returned to the same or another institution to continue their education. Adding 'stop-out' to research highlighted yet another degree of complexity regarding students who withdrew from one institution to continue their studies at another. If the former institution is unaware of the student's re-enrolment elsewhere, the student is labelled a drop-out rather than a stop-out. While each of these terms implies withdrawal is an adverse action, later research identified that withdrawal is, at times, a positive step for students (Harris 2016; Schnepf 2017; Tinto 1993).

More recent literature tends to use attrition, retention, and persistence when describing course withdrawal or completion. Attrition, more commonly used in American studies, suggests withdrawal, either voluntary or involuntary. Mortality, drop-out, stop-out and attrition are not terms used in the current study other than in quotes or direct references to the work of others. Instead, retention and persistence are both used in this study. Retention has become a widely used and accepted term over the last century, but it is slowly being replaced in the literature by persistence. The common consensus within the literature is that retention is an institutional action – something institutions do, while persistence implies an action or characteristic of an individual. Despite this, literature often uses the terms interchangeably (Hagedorn 2005).

While we seek to improve retention and have done for many decades, there is an underlying issue with this way of thinking. Improving institutional effectiveness has many benefits, including improvements to the student experience and, potentially, retention; however, we may prefer to view increased retention as a by-product of institutional enhancements rather than its goal. As Tinto (2016) suggests, 'Students…do not seek to be retained. They seek to persist.'

Persistence is discussed in current retention literature in many ways, often as an alternative to completion. Students who complete their course, for example, are often labelled 'persisters' as they have demonstrated some degree of persistence. Pearson (2019, p. 13) demonstrates this point by comparing two students, Karen and Connor, below. In the quote which follows, Pearson describes Karen and Connor as students with different backgrounds, experiences, and outcomes, but he only links their outcomes to his definition of persistence:

> Karen came back to the university to finish her degree. Although she had attended college more than 10 years ago, when she decided to join the degree completion program, she knew she would make it. She works in an administrative role at a privately held corporation. She has the support of her employer with tuition reimbursement. She has gotten further support from the university to help her while compiling a very high GPA (that darn "A–!"). Karen has used prior learning assessment to add to her credits, saving time and money. She's been very involved, serving as an ambassador for the program and going to Rome for a study abroad course. Karen is a persister.
>
> Connor came through the same blended and online program that Karen did. He works in a blue-collar position at a large publicly traded company. He did not complete the required entry course, even though he was given a full scholarship for the course. Despite multiple efforts to reach out to him, he never responded and stopped attending class. He started a Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) but did not complete the document. He has not successfully completed any courses, and he owes the university for his first term. Connor is a non-persister.

While Pearson's quote is typical of how retention research often views persistence, it highlights a significant problem with the concept's use. Taken in this way, it appears persistence is the binary opposite of withdrawal; students either persist or withdraw. We cannot 'know' whether Karen or Connor persisted; we can only 'know' that Karen completed while Connor did not. Unfortunately, defining persistence in this way presents an incomplete picture and misrepresents students whose situations may have been incompatible with their organisation, subject, and with successful completion of their course. It assumes a non-completing student has 'given up' while a completing student has not, but this assumption can obscure the reality of academic persistence.

The current study views persistence differently. Drawing on both the literal definition of 'to persist': 'to continue steadfastly or obstinately despite opposition' (Collins 2000); and on the contemporary retention literature, the study accepts that all graduates persist, but that not all persisters graduate (Hagedorn 2005). The study proposes that persistence experienced by students varies, recognising that all students may have demonstrated persistence at some time during their education. In this study, 'persistence' represents students who have overcome their difficulties or doubts to set aside their consideration of withdrawal and renew their commitment to complete their studies, and students who continue to work through difficulties and doubts while attempting to complete their studies. Operationalised in this way, the term 'persistence' becomes a demonstration of persistence itself, with a particular interest in understanding how students experience their persistence, not as a signal of completion.

While a considerable amount of literature has used the term persistence over the years, Foster *et al.* (2011) initially used the term to identify students who were 'persisters' as used in this project. Part of a large-scale project funded by the HEA to address retention in UK HEIs (Higher

Education Institutions), their research brought to the fore the notion of 'doubt', ultimately pointing out that, concerning retention, persistence depended on doubt. The project, consolidated by Thomas (2012), reported that around 40% of students consider withdrawal or question their ability and likelihood of completion. However, the proportion of students withdrawing from HE in the UK is around 8%, leaving a large group of students persisting. Discovering that more students doubt their ability to complete their studies than leave, Thomas had identified a significant group of students previously ignored in retention studies.

Since 2012, few authors have picked up on the term 'doubt' or paired it with persistence. Those who have attempt to establish clear statistics and understand doubting and persistence to help future students (Sanders *et al.* 2016; Thomas and Hanson 2014; Xuereb 2014, 2015). Martin *et al.* (2016) discuss 'doubters' in detail, positioning students in three functional groups: Committed Students, Doubters, and Quitters. The authors classified 'doubters' as those who reported 'having seriously considered discontinuing their…studies' (p. 137). Their extensive research identified further similarities among the 'doubters'. Typically struggling with the level and volume of work and dissatisfied with their progress and ability, 'doubters' were particularly sensitive to negative influences. In contrast with Martin *et al.*'s definition, Foster *et al.* initially described persisters as those who had '…seriously considered leaving…' (2011, p. 25), finding it applied to around one-third of students surveyed. A later study reported that 43% of students fell into the 'doubting' category (Xuereb 2014).

Thomas and Hansen (2014) explain their understanding of persisters as those who have previously considered withdrawing, clearly based on the work of Foster *et al.* (2011). Furthering Thomas's (2012) work, their research agreed that students' previous doubt allows us to classify them as persisters and suggested doubters could become persisters through an increased sense of belonging. With their qualitative research identifying potential changes from doubt to persistence, their findings indicated that, while doubt is often a consequence of academic difficulty, the support that could best encourage persistence comes from family, friends, and an increased sense of belonging.

Foster *et al.*'s (2011) research had previously identified that students experiencing doubt would often provide at least two reasons for their doubting, and this was later supported by Xuereb (2014). Citing various reasons from financial to personal and support as influential in students' progression from doubt to persistence, Xuereb (2015) extends Foster *et al.*'s findings to include resourcefulness. Agreeing with the current study, Xuereb notes that previous literature has focused on students who have withdrawn, with few studies examining the students who had demonstrated persistence. Xuereb (2015) has since used her findings with the concepts of resourcefulness and coping to predict doubt among students. Using psychometric tools, Sanders

et al. (2016) attempt to predict retention by identifying potential doubters, explaining that while students who have doubted will not always withdraw, '…those who do withdraw first experience doubt' (p. 70).

Appreciating and understanding the enormity of academic persistence and retention is crucial for future research. The terminology and research gaps help focus that research and ensure new studies extend our understanding of the phenomenon. However, we have learned a vast amount from early retention research, and we cannot ignore its impact. Therefore, the following section outlines the early research and demonstrates how early models and theories continue to benefit current persistence studies.

2.2 Historical Overview of Retention Research

'Should these students have been admitted to college in the first place?'

'Does…withdrawal reflect upon the curriculum or the methods of teaching?'

Retention is a current debate, and the above quotes might echo voices heard in colleges and universities in 2021. However, they are quotes from a study published in 1937, demonstrating the length of the debate and its complex nature – if there were a straightforward answer, we would no longer be asking these questions.

McNeely, the author of the paper in which the questions above were asked (by the Assistant Commissioner of Education), provided one of the first documented, large-scale studies of retention. Conducted from an institutional perspective and focusing on colleges' ability to retain students until graduation, the study highlighted 'causal relationships' in what McNeely described as 'student mortality'. The study identified factors that are still considered in many retention studies today. Indeed, findings from the study, including gender, subject area, age, and finance, continue to influence current retention studies. McNeely's use of the term 'mortality', however, has thankfully been reconsidered. His research undoubtedly informed many later studies and may have been considered a landmark study in its own time. However, the period of unrest that followed as World War II ensued saw studies of retention decline over the coming decades.

The following 20 years saw rising college enrolments and increased participation in education. Unconvinced that demographic and social data, such as that used by McNeely, was sufficient for dealing with the complex study of retention, Summerskill (1962), consistent with others at the time, recognised that psychological concepts could help with the retention puzzle. Summerskill introduced the idea of motivation to his retention research, distinguishing between motivation to attend and study at college and motivation to graduate.

As enrolment increases began to slow, concerns that enrolment decreases could be approaching grew, generating greater interest in retention in the 1960s and 70s. Spady's (1970) publication, introducing his Sociological Model of Student Departure, encouraged the systematic study of retention. Spady noted that earlier retention studies had consistently fallen into one of the following six categories:

- Philosophical or theoretical – studies assuming withdrawal was undesirable and requiring prevention. Such studies would often suggest theories to overcome the 'problem'.
- Census – studies using data to describe the extent of student withdrawal.
- Autopsy – studies using self-reported data from withdrawn students to describe their reasons for leaving.
- Case – studies that track students identified as being at-risk to determine outcomes and solutions.
- Descriptive – studies that provide an overview of withdrawn students' characteristics.
- Predictive – studies that attempt to identify admissions criteria to predict student withdrawal.

Looking to Durkheim's (1951) theory of suicide to provide a sociological lens to his research, Spady compared students' withdrawal from college to suicide. Shared group values and friendship became the foundations of Spady's model, as he believed them to lead to academic and social integration, respectively. Drawing on Durkheim's theory, he compared those who withdraw from college to those who commit suicide. He suggested that while individuals who fail to integrate into normal society will, at times, withdraw themselves from that society through the act of suicide, failure to integrate into the 'normal' society of college could lead students to remove themselves from that society. Accepted as the first attempt to synthesise earlier empirical work to form a comprehensive framework, Spady's model was one of the first to take a sociological approach to the study of retention. It was this model that later became the basis of Tinto's model.

Tinto's initial work, in which he developed his original student integration model (Tinto 1975, 1993), was one of the earliest to provide a model of retention constructed around empirical evidence. In contrast to previous contributions that focussed on linking variables such as age, class and gender to retention, Tinto concentrated on understanding how each of those attributes impacts the process of dropping out – ultimately introducing his theoretical model of student departure.

Building on Spady's earlier model, particularly his use of Durkheim's theory of suicide, Tinto incorporated earlier psychological and organisational models, using students' entry characteristics and their commitment to their institution and graduation as predictors of

persistence. Described as having '…its roots in Durkheim's theory of suicide' (Tinto 1975, p. 91), just as Spady's had before him, Tinto's theory claimed integration is key to retention – an idea still prevalent in today's literature.

Astin (1984) evolved a theory of involvement, claiming psychological characteristics affect students' social and academic involvement. His theory suggested that the two most important factors associated with college persistence are personal and environmental. Like Tinto's focus on integration, Astin concluded that involvement is key to student persistence – the more significant a student's participation in their academic and social life at college, the greater their propensity to persist.

When institutions introduced enrolment management systems, retention emerged as an essential aspect of their strategic planning. Bean's approach, first published in 1980 and subsequently altered in later years with colleagues, used an organisational concept of employee turnover adapted from Price (1977, cited in Aljohani 2016). Arguing that Durkheim's theory of suicide was unsuitable for use in retention studies, Bean suggested that earlier approaches had focussed too heavily on sociology. He argued that the social variables on which they relied were incompatible with non-traditional students' persistence. His work with Metzner (1985) argued that for non-traditional students, we should consider background, academic, psychological and environmental factors.

The purpose of each of the models outlined above was similar; they aimed to theorise, explain and predict student withdrawal (Nicoletti 2019). They did so, however, through a focus on different elements of the subject. For McNeely, Spady and Tinto, the focus was predominantly sociological, focusing on student demographics, attributes, subject and environment. In contrast, Summerskill's approach was psychological, with a focus on motivation and satisfaction. In a move away from tradition, Bean's approach was organisational.

Since the research and creation of the models outlined above, institutions have developed many programs, initiatives, and ideas to support students considered at-risk of withdrawal. While new theories are slow to emerge, scholars continuously refine and expand previous approaches by integrating them with ideas from other disciplines. Scholars have based many predictive models on Tinto's early work (Allen 1997; Kerby 2015; Sadler *et al.* 1997; Stuart *et al.* 2014; Weng *et al.* 2010). However, his theory attracted criticism for its lack of consideration of students' college experiences and inconsistent empirical support (Braxton 2000; Karp *et al.* 2010; Metz 2002; Neuville *et al.* 2007; Tinto 1982).

Despite advances in retention research, eight decades on from the first major sociological study, the focus has remained essentially unchanged. Researchers continue to develop predictive models, with some reportedly doing so 'very precisely' (Cannistrà *et al*. 2020, p. 1). The primary focus continues to be 'the conditions that are thought to hinder or promote retention instead of the actual experiences of the students' (Ashour 2019, p. 358).

The following section draws attention to recent research and demonstrates a consistent focus on sociological, psychological, and organisational approaches to student retention studies. It presents an area of study from each of the three approaches to demonstrate this consistency as follows: integration (sociological), motivation (psychological), and human resource management (organisational).

2.3 Current Debates

McNeely's questions from 1937 remain unanswered, and recent research continues to ask them, albeit framed in a marginally different way. In 2019, for example, Pearson asked 'What makes one adult student persistent? What makes another student bound for failure?' (p. 13). We continue to see clear links to the earlier research outlined above in the current literature. Some studies have focused on sociological aspects of retention, often looking at new students' integration satisfaction with college. Others have continued to focus on psychological concepts, attempting to understand individuals' attributes and behaviours that make them more susceptible to difficulty in college and, therefore, withdrawal. Many researchers have focused on what organisations can do, initiating interventions to support students through their studies.

Understanding the sociological factors that can affect students, such as their support networks, career goals, and ability to cope in social situations, can help institutions ensure adequate measures are in place for new and continuing students. Students' unique circumstances and varying support requirements link closely to the ideas within the widening participation agendas. Ensuring a mix of students with different social backgrounds is a core element of widening participation. In turn, widening participation requires institutions to have some means to support these students on their transition to college or university regardless of social background. Spady and Tinto's work was some of the first to take a sociological approach to student retention. Their models still have clear links to retention five decades on, emphasised by the need to retain students from different backgrounds with different needs.

A student's ability to 'fit in' and to integrate academically and socially can be problematic when students find themselves in a class of students with different backgrounds to their own. Overcoming these differences, accepting them, and taking the necessary steps to embed

themselves wholly in their new environment has been subject to considerable study since Spady and Tinto presented their early models. Efforts to understand the sociology of students who withdraw have often remained closely linked to the ideas expressed by Spady and Tinto, with a focus on integration. The following section looks at some of the more recent literature relating to integration and its links to early models.

Sociological

Eaton and Bean (1995) suggested that students' ability to integrate within college potentially acts as '…primary indicators of adjustment to the college environment' (p. 9), and the link between integration and retention remains consistently cited as key (see Jüttler 2020; Warren 2020; Haverila *et al.* 2020). While research distinguishes between academic and social integration, it suggests both have a considerable influence on persistence. Academic integration – the degree to which students are involved with academic pursuits relevant to their courses and satisfied with their subject and studies, can often be seen through students' engagement in academic tasks, in-class situations and their ability to manage their workload (Lord *et al.*, 2013). As such, this may be observable by teaching staff and, therefore, manageable (for example, if students appear disengaged within classes and are failing to submit work or attend). Social integration, however, may be harder to gauge; accordingly, it may be more challenging to manage. Students lacking in social integration may see themselves as outsiders, with difficulty making friends and less involvement in extracurricular activities in social settings. Interpersonal relationships, and the support and interaction these involve, can help create a sense of belonging and friendships and typically arise from involvement in activities outside the classroom and informal interactions with peers and staff (Spady 1970; Tinto 1975).

Tinto's model, built around the idea that integration is key to student success, suggests that both academic and social integration influence students' commitment. Without this commitment, students are less likely to persist. Students' commitment before attending college, which arises from earlier experiences, family support and students' characteristics, is enhanced by integration, combining to enhance persistence (Young *et al.* 2013). The more integrated a student is, the more emotional support they are likely to have in the form of friendships, often cushioning against the stresses involved with college life (Wilcox *et al.*, 2005).

Subsequent research has agreed that integration is fundamental to students' persistence, with academic integration used to positively predict retention and its associated commitment and grades (Bronkema and Bowman 2019; Davidson *et al.* 2009; Gabi and Sharpe 2021; Woosley and Miller 2009; Zwolak *et al.* 2017). While social integration is also said to promote persistence (Milem and Berger 1997), it is less clear as a predictor of grades. Studies show both higher and

lower grades resulting from social integration (Froh *et al.* 2010; Woosley and Miller 2009, respectively). Literature also recognises that supporting social integration can be challenging (Leese 2010; Stuber 2011). Developing meaningful relationships at college can provide support networks, essential to social integration (Gerdes and Mallinckrodt 1994). Often studied through the lens of social capital (shared values, networks, relationships), this can provide valuable insights into student integration (Gray *et al.* 2013; Hlinka 2017).

Tinto's model attracted criticism for its lack of use with a non-traditional student population (Metz 2002), as this student group report lower social integration levels (Bean and Metzner 1985). This finding could link to prejudice and discrimination faced by these students (Cabrera *et al.* 1999). Lower levels of social integration, with less involvement in social activities, are also reported among first-generation students (Pascarella *et al.* 2004). However, levels of integration vary. Stuber's (2011) study found that around half of the first-generation students appeared well integrated, while a third of the students were not integrated and, as a result, felt 'alienated'. Often living off-campus, this is unsurprising, yet it may be those students whose social integration needs are most significant to avoid the feeling of being an 'outsider' (Pascarella *et al.* 2004). In contrast, Kipp (2019) found that while some students in her study found integrating challenging, they did integrate and did not perceive that their first-generation student status had impacted their ability to integrate.

The concept of integration is, however, questioned by some. Described as an ambiguous concept with no clear definition (Beekhoven and Dekkers 2005), the role of integration, particularly for non-traditional students, is challenging to understand fully. With little discussion about what integration means within education research, we often return to Tinto's explanation. However, Tinto's definition of integration could instead be classed as a definition of involvement (Spencer-Oatey and Dauber 2019), demonstrating the ambiguity referred to by Beekhoven and Dekkers. Recent research has shown a picture that, while favouring integration and its use in retention and persistence, demonstrates the complexity of integration as a concept and its use with specific student groups.

For many, integration remains accepted as a factor supporting persistence (Cao 2020; Evans 2013; Gilardi and Guglielmetti 2011; Gunuc and Kuzu 2015; Odom *et al.* 2016; Sidelinger *et al.* 2016; Thomas and Hanson 2014). Odom *et al.*'s qualitative study of graduate students suggested that establishing relationships with academic advisors and social interaction between students help build a sense of unity. Students could see others had similar experiences, which enabled them to 'survive' the first year. Using the terms engagement and belonging rather than integration, Gunuc and Kuzu, in their quantitative study of Turkish students, explained that relationships both with faculty and peers influenced engagement. While the faculty support

shown promoted participation, a lack of peer support was a deterrent. Students' sense of belonging increased through engagement in on-campus activities and social interaction. Students in Thomas and Hanson's (2014) evaluative study recognised the importance of establishing friendships. While they relied on support from their engagement team to organise student-faculty communication, the faculty support offered was instrumental in one participant's decision to persist. A similar finding suggested integration with faculty was necessary to ensure students feel comfortable seeking the help they need, pointing out that staff must build rapport with their students to facilitate this. They described this as a form of social integration with the academic team (Sidelinger *et al.*, 2016). An Italian mixed-method study provided a similar statement. It suggested that both staff-student and student-student relationships 'becomes the most powerful influence on their academic experiences' (Gilardi and Guglielmetti 2011, p.47). Their study, highlighting several types of interaction, demonstrated a significant variation in students' persistence based on their type of interaction, with 96.2% of actively-interacting students persisting contrasted with only 10% of non-interacting students.

However, others demonstrate that only one aspect of integration, academic or social, is significant (Mamiseishvili, 2012; Gray *et al.*, 2013; Lord *et al.*, 2013). In their evaluation study of upper-level students, Lord *et al.* claimed only academic integration is significantly related to persistence through its link to increased institutional commitment. With no discussion of social integration in their study, however, it may be that social integration was significant in lower years, as it is likely that participants had established good peer relationships earlier in their courses. A study of international students in their first year provided a similar finding, in which the authors highlight a positive correlation between academic, but not social, integration (Mamiseishvili 2012). This finding supports earlier research by Zhao *et al.* (2005), in which the authors describe international students as inclined to spend more time on academic work with less concern over social integration. Gray *et al.*'s (2013) study takes an alternative view. Focussing on using social media to build relationships and support students' social integration, they concluded that social adjustment supports students' persistence.

Further findings describe a more nuanced approach to integration, where integration may be necessary for some students but less so for others (Dika and D'Amico 2016; Jenert *et al.* 2016; Young *et al.* 2013). Discussing their mixed-methods study of undergraduate students, Young *et al.* claim that integration is essential for some students; for others, integration has no influence. They suggest that peer interaction and the relationships it helped build were significant to those who persisted. However, for those who withdrew, the reason stated was a change of mind rather than a lack of integration. Despite this, they agree that integration was significant. An extensive survey of STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths) students also found that while

integration was helpful for some, it is not influential for all (Dika and D'Amico 2016). The study found the difference between students related to their course. While integration predicted persistence in some STEM majors, only academic integration was influential for those studying PEMC-STEM (PEMC - Physical sciences, Engineering, Maths, and Computer sciences). In part, they attributed this to first-generation versus non-first-generation student status. They agree with Nunez (1998), who suggested integration is unimportant to first-generation students – a finding with which others disagree (Próspero and Vohra-Gupta 2007). In their qualitative study of students in Switzerland, Jenert *et al.* view integration and its influence through a more psychological lens, agreeing that for some, integration is helpful, while for others, it is not. They based this view on their findings which allowed them to classify students based on personality and behaviour. The authors propose that integration may or may not be beneficial, depending on the type of student (for example, their views on course requirements or their tendency to compare themselves to others).

Motl *et al.* (2018) attempted to determine persistence influencing variables, finding that academic preparation, academic integration, and 'psychosociocultural' integration (explained as psychological and social adjustment to campus) were essential to persistence. Academic preparation and academic integration did not correlate directly with persistence, and the authors concluded that 'no matter how well prepared the student or how much academic success they enjoy while at college, psychosociocultural factors have a large impact on student persistence' (2018, p. 61).

Despite Tinto's previous assertion that while academic integration is paramount to student success but that too much social integration can have the opposite effect, the studies referred to above did not discuss this. Regardless of this, if we accept that integration is beneficial, we need to understand how to increase integration. Several studies focus on methods for supporting both academic and social integration. Learning Communities (Odom *et al.*, 2016), access to user-friendly Virtual Learning Environments (Lee and Choi 2013), mentoring systems (Collings *et al.*, 2014; Thomas and Hanson, 2014), and social media (Gray *et al.* 2013) are some of the commonly used systems. Many institutions already use tools to support transitions, social networking and academic work, and research is now beginning to explore their success regarding supporting persistence. As our understanding of persistence improves and further studies of students' persistence experiences are conducted, such interventions may become integral to the student experience. They may also support student persistence.

Psychological

Research has attempted to identify psychological areas that contribute to students' ability or desire to persist in college and often builds on psychological factors addressed in Summerskill's and Bean's seminal works. This section describes some recent motivation research concerning persistence and its links to early research by Summerskill.

Every student's sociological background may be different and complex, yet so are their minds and behaviours. Understanding these differences should help support students who are often '…psychologically unprepared to navigate the murky waters of higher education' (Swail 2004). While students may face similar difficulties during their education, how they deal with those difficulties will vary depending on their psychological states (Kerby 2015).

Using concepts of motivation in persistence studies is not new - we see links to motivation in early theoretical models (e.g. Summerskill 1962). However, the overarching, historical approach to the concept of motivation is now understood to be part of a broader picture. Studies from various institutions with diverse students use different aspects of motivation to highlight and explain persistence and withdrawal. While researchers vary in their methodologies and findings, recent research often points to motivation as a factor underlying persistence.

As was highlighted in Bean's model (1980), motivation to study and persist with those studies is among the most commonly discussed psychological concepts in the current retention literature. Motivation as a general concept, defined as 'the process responsible for the initiation, intensity, and persistence of behaviour' (Usher and Morris 2012, p. 36), has been subject to psychological study for many decades. There are, however, multiple areas within the general concept of motivation. Falling within this study has been academic motivation – an idea not dissimilar but explicitly linked to students' effort to pursue their educational endeavours. Reported to create confidence in one's ability, along with an increased value of education and desire to learn (Deci *et al.* 1991), academic persistence research consistently cites academic motivation. Thought to support interest, enjoyment and achievement in academic situations (Martin 2002), it has, unsurprisingly, played a role in attempts to understand and promote persistence. The perceived importance of motivational factors is so great that literature has previously described them as '…the sine qua non of persistence, and therefore the most important target of persistence research' (Ramist 1981, p. 10).

Arafeh *et al.*'s (2020) study of adult minority women participating in online programs demonstrates the importance of motivation for persistence. In their study, self-motivation became a key theme, but participants' quotes suggest a more nuanced form of motivation. For example, participants spoke of 'the outcome' being motivational and family support 'encouraging and

motivating'. This finding suggests that, while self-motivation has been part of their experience, encouragement from other people and expected rewards have been similarly motivational.

Motivation is, however, a broad phrase with the potential to conceal subtle differences within the literature. Raynor and Entin's (1982, in Allen 1999) general description suggests motivation relies on the initial subjective probability of success, feedback, the nature of the task at hand, and intelligence level. We see motivation as a construct comprising several parts that we can investigate individually or collectively from this definition. In line with this, Hobson and Puruhito (2018) explain that an interplay of variables can be observed, with no single variable predicting student motivation or success. Two motivational constructs have been identified as particularly relevant to the study of academic persistence and are discussed briefly in this section: self-determination and need achievement.

Self-determination

Persistence literature often cites Deci and Ryan's (1985) self-determination theory. The theory assumes human beings have three basic psychological needs – competence (control and mastery of our environment, prior knowledge of the results of our actions), relatedness (interactions with others and a feeling of belonging), and autonomy (a sense of free will). These needs can be seen clearly in persistence literature, even in articles that do not directly discuss motivation. For example, studies often cite failing in classes (or lack of competence) as a withdrawal-promoting factor (Simon *et al.*, 2015; Stewart *et al.*, 2015; Smiley *et al.*, 2016). Similarly, we see studies citing a lack of social integration and support networks (or a lack of relatedness) as a critical reason for withdrawal (Yorke and Longden, 2008; Willcoxson *et al.*, 2011; Willans and Seary, 2018). Finally, research cites a lack of autonomy, or feelings of a lack of control over one's studies, as detrimental to persistence (Daniels *et al.* 2014; Respondek *et al.* 2017; Stupnisky *et al.* 2012).

Deci and Ryan's theory differentiates intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. They define intrinsic motivation as unlinked to rewards other than satisfaction, and extrinsic motivation as linked to separable rewards. We often consider persistent students to be intrinsically motivated to become competent in challenging situations. For example, Zhou's (2015) qualitative study of doctoral students posited that the students' intrinsic motivation, specifically their inherent interest in research, supported their persistence. Noting that their motivation came from '…a strong desire for competence and success…' he found their desire was beneficial during times of hardship (p. 726). The high emotional and social cost of quitting further enhanced this desire to complete. While doctoral studies may not be directly comparable with undergraduate studies, research has identified links between intrinsic motivation and persistence in studies relating to undergraduate

students (Vallerand *et al.*, 1997; Taylor *et al.*, 2014; Goldman *et al.*, 2017; Pizzolato *et al.*, 2017). Conversely, Simon *et al.* (2015) found that intrinsic motivation did not significantly link to persistence. However, they suggest that this finding could be due to their study's design, in which motivation was self-reported and not directly related to the students' academic subject.

Interviews with Australian university students involved in workplace learning identified motivation from placements. Students commented that placements are the best part of the year because they provide the necessary motivation (Trede and McEwen 2015). Rather than relying on intrinsic motivation to succeed, it appears those students may have required extrinsic motivation in the form of placement. Completing students reported higher motivation levels in a study of senior undergraduates and students who had previously withdrawn (Young *et al.* 2013). They described positive interactions with peers and instructors as having been influential in their persistence and '…strengthen[ing]…decision[s] to stay in the program' (p. 73). While the authors suggest that the students' clinical integration was more important than either academic or social integration, their findings relating to motivation could be considered both social and academic integration. Participants described peers as 'family', while they stated instructors' feedback had led to 'increased confidence', findings which we could interpret as social and academic integration, respectively. While clinical integration was undoubtedly crucial to these students, it may have been a 'vehicle' for otherwise hidden motivation from social and academic integration.

According to self-determination theory, we can view motivation as existing on a continuum, beginning with amotivation and leading to extrinsic motivation and intrinsic motivation. This continuum demonstrates the fluidity of motivation and its amenability to change (Moore *et al.* 2020). While this suggests that motivation levels can increase, it also suggests the opposite is true; motivation can reduce over time, which can lead to withdrawal.

Need achievement

Less prevalent in current literature, components of the need achievement theory of motivation are often referred to by researchers studying motivation and persistence. The need achievement theory of motivation characterises students as success-oriented, failure-avoidant, and failure-accepting. While success-oriented students tend to be positive and proactive, responding to setbacks with a positive attitude, failure-avoidant students are motivated by a fear of failure, with more anxiety and uncertainty about their abilities. Unlike success-oriented students' positive approaches to dealing with setbacks, setbacks can increase the self-doubt and anxiety felt by failure-avoidant students, potentially leading to them avoiding complex tasks (Martin 2002). Failure-accepting students are those who no longer attempt to avoid failure – their lack of motivation leads them to 'give up'.

Research has linked students' motivation to achieve with their beliefs about their intelligence and its malleability. Students with a fixed view of intelligence reportedly respond negatively to challenges, believing poor performance defines their intelligence. In contrast, students who view intelligence as malleable are more inclined to persist with challenges as they see failure as an incentive to work harder or adopt alternative strategies (Yeager and Dweck 2012).

A study of second-year retention partially supported the hypothesis that motivational attitudes are related to persistence, finding that a lack of well-defined goals and motivations decreases the likelihood of persistence (Morrow and Ackermann 2012). This finding is consistent with Ten Hoeve *et al.*'s (2017) study in which they differentiated between motivations to begin studying and motivations to persist. The authors identified that those studying their first-choice subject were almost twice as likely to complete their courses. Reasons to continue came from a combination of factors, with all participants highlighting intrinsic motivations and a third of participants highlighting various sources of support.

Allen (1999) concluded that among minority students, the desire to complete college directly affected persistence; however, this was not true of non-minority students. His measure of motivation was, however, limited to one occasion. While perhaps not directly comparable, Tinto's later models included two instances of commitment, as he asserts that commitment to one's studies can change throughout the course. Goal commitment, or a desire to achieve, is linked to motivation and can play a significant role in students' persistence. As discussed by Tinto in his early research and included in his theoretical models, commitment has been an ongoing source of discussion in persistence studies. As Allen (1999, p. 461) suggests, the desire to achieve may not be necessary for all students, but it may be the 'missing link' for those facing setbacks.

Differentiating between pre-study motivation and motivation during courses, a study of Scottish nursing students found course reputation motivated course choice. In contrast, 'passion' for their subject motivated subject choice and the decision to study. Once studying, motivation came from role models. Linked to the desire to become a nurse and the professional identity that brings, role models were other nurses, mainly teaching staff, friends, and family. Non-nursing family and friends did not provide the same motivation, possibly reflecting the identity those students hoped for in the future (Mckendry *et al.*, 2014).

Despite its reduction in citations over the past few years, the need-achievement theory maintains clear links to academic persistence. Motivation as a general persistence-promoting concept continues to form part of the debate, but it is becoming ever-more interlinked with other concepts.

Organisational

Unlike the sociological and psychological constructs used by early researchers such as Spady and Tinto, Bean (1980) looked to Human Resource Management to provide an organisational perspective. An understanding of organisational behaviour can be beneficial as it can impact all students, not only those who fall into specific categories (Gansemer-Topf and Schuh 2006). This section outlines more recent studies adopting a similar perspective and discusses the potential benefits and constraints of such an approach.

Ackerman and Schibrowsky (2007), taking a side-step from traditional education research, drew on customer relationship marketing to develop a relationship marketing model for students. Their research explains that campus staff can use consumer marketing principles to retain students, just as businesses use them to retain customers. They suggest 'it is easier, less expensive, and more profitable to retain current customers [or students] than to acquire new ones' (p. 311). Demonstrating the similarities between commercial customers and students, Ackerman and Shibrowsky assert that relationship marketing is appropriate for student retention. Drawing on Kuh's (2001) research, they suggest that relationship-building is everyone's job in business and education. Despite front-line staff perhaps marking the obvious point of contact for a student, '…only a web of interlocking initiatives can over time shape an institutional culture that promotes student success' (Kuh 2001 p. 31).

Organisational approaches attract criticism for failing to consider individual student differences (Tinto 1993); however, it is essential to remember that colleges are, ultimately, organisations whose internal behaviours can affect students and, potentially, their persistence (Berger 2001). While Berger asserts that organisations themselves do not 'behave', he reminds us that those within organisations do, and that employees carry out those behaviours while acting on behalf of the organisation. Berger's ideas that all campuses exhibit five 'behaviour dimensions', namely bureaucratic, collegial, political, symbolic and systemic, albeit to varying degrees, have been criticised for their abstractness (Lambert *et al.*, 2007). Suggesting these behaviours are too far removed from students' experiences, Lambert *et al.* consider that other organisational features are closer to those experiences and, therefore, potentially more helpful. Such features, they suggest, include peer environments and programmatic considerations.

In recent years, often linked to widening participation agendas and seeking to improve retention, many organisations have piloted initiatives and adopted new strategies to support students' persistence with a clear focus on features such as peer mentoring with varying degrees of success. Although it may be challenging to ascertain what proportion of improved persistence has been a direct result of these initiatives, some evidence suggests that their success is beneficial.

Interventions do not need to be large-scale. Von Hippel and Hofflinger (2021) argue that interventions do not need to be 'programs' run for specific purposes or lengths of time. Instead, they suggest they can take the form of policies and procedures and institutional behaviours. However, according to the authors, what is needed is the analysis and use of data from interventions to ensure their success can be understood and evaluated, leading to targeted initiatives when needed.

We must bear in mind that students are, or should be, at the heart of any educational organisation. Therefore, it seems appropriate that we consider the interactions between customers, i.e. students, and staff. Where relationships are tense, there will be a greater propensity for students to withdraw. Rather than looking to staff to provide support, they are likely to see them as part of the organisational structures which, in their view, are not working. While colleges can select and run various interventions, ranging from those that support students with academic and subject skills to those focusing on students' motivations, integration, and social networks, they should select interventions according to students' needs. Colleges must look at their student groups and identify the interventions that can 'contribute to student persistence in their particular academic settings' (Xu 2017, p. 60).

2.4 Integrative Approaches

Over the eight decades of published work, it has become evident that there is no one straightforward approach to the study of academic persistence. Instead, research continues to adapt previous models, combine theory from a range of disciplines, and produce new and valuable insight into student retention. While research has shifted between psychological, sociological, and organisational approaches through theoretical underpinnings or methodologies, there is now an increasing move to combine those approaches. However, many studies remain focussed on single aspects of approaches that, if looked at differently, offer multiple perspectives within one theory. Among the approaches that provide these multiple perspectives are identity, agency, and emotion, each discussed in this section and reflective of the current study's findings.

Psychological, sociological, and organisational approaches overlap. The current study positions itself in the centre of these approaches, as each theme is interlinked and impacted by psychological, sociological, and organisational factors. Imposing psychological, sociological, and organisational labels may help us make sense of a complex world and may, therefore, help develop our thinking about subjects such as persistence. However, remaining focused on these individual labels as individual factors could be limiting. While previous studies would appear to have given less attention to how they work together, the current study aims to pay closer attention to their relationships.

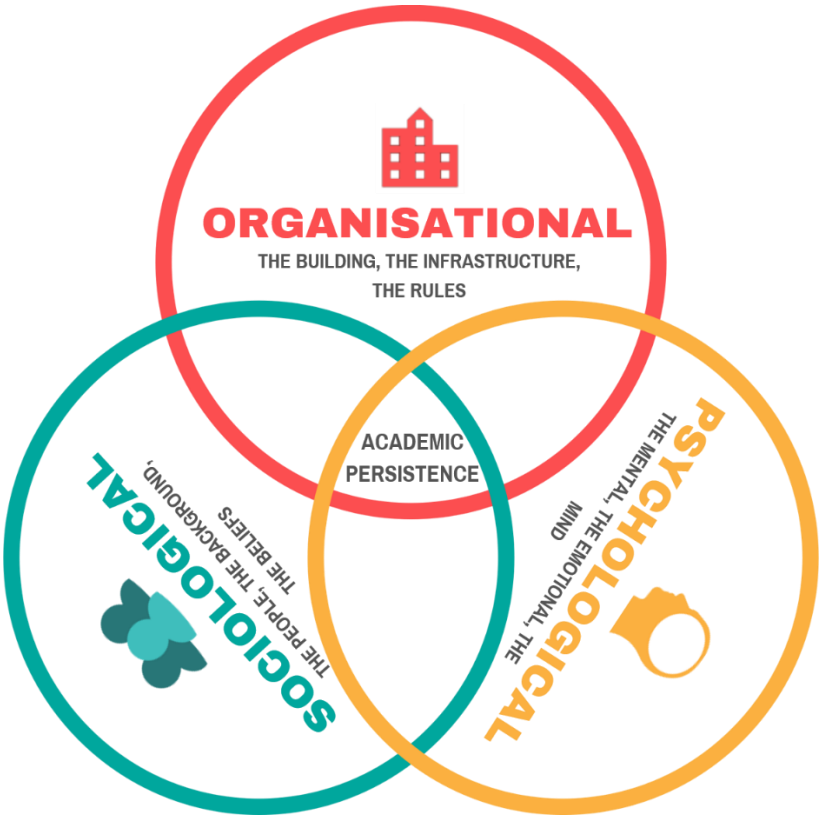


Figure 1 - The overlapping of approaches

The overlapping nature of the three areas focused on in literature: organisational, sociological, and psychological, is represented in Figure 1. While most literature focuses on single parts of the diagram, many of the concepts in persistence research do not fit into discrete areas. Instead, while single aspects may lend themselves to the discussion for clarity in research, ignoring the overlaps can lead to oversimplification of academic persistence. Psychological, sociological, and organisational factors impact the lived experience of students considering withdrawal. It may be an understanding of the effect of overlaps in these three areas on individuals' experiences that is useful in the study of academic persistence as we advance. Of the concepts identified throughout the literature review, two have been discussed regularly across the decades and have links to psychological, sociological, and organisational approaches.

Motivation, for example, has clear links to each of the three approaches. However, studies pay little attention to how individuals experience their motivation and how institutions or individuals foster it. It is evident that, while motivation as a general construct may not be particularly enlightening in the study of persistence, there are many concepts within the study of motivation that are useful and that can provide insight into students' persistence. However, as with all other

approaches, these ideas may be more helpful and insightful when combined with theories and concepts from other disciplines.

Also apparent in each of the approaches is the concept of integration. However, much of the research looks solely at how institutions can support integration or how students are inclined to integrate based on their backgrounds. There is much to learn about individuals' experiences regarding motivation and integration. The opportunity to combine these concepts, rather than separating them as is often done, should not be overlooked.

When discussing our students' persistence, we must bear in mind that their motivation, integration, emotions, sense of agency and self, and many other aspects of their persistence are affected by multiple factors. For example, they may see their motivation as internal or personality traits, and we may see them simply as motivated individuals. However, closer attention may reveal motivated individuals whose inherent motivation is either bolstered or reduced by the organisation they belong to and their social world. Family, friendships, previous experiences of relationships, work, and studies can affect motivation, and individuals will use their relationships and experiences differently. We should also consider the organisation's effect on motivation, including the physical buildings in which students study, the transport links available, and the staff and resources on-site.

It is upon the linkages between these areas that the current study focuses. The following section provides an overview of some of the theories that can support that combined approach.

Identity

When students begin a new course of study, they often think about their motivation to study and consider how motivated or unmotivated they feel. Similarly, they are aware of their ability or difficulty integrating – from joining clubs or discussions to making friends. They are, indirectly, considering the concepts of motivation and integration. However, it is, perhaps, less likely that students will consider the idea of identity (other than that relating to areas such as gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity). Students are often quick to realise the importance of motivation and integration, as they see those as directly impacting their studies. Identity, however, tends to be given less attention by staff or students. As staff, we aim to integrate and motivate our students, providing opportunities for them to work together and socialise. We do not, in general, ask them to consider who they are.

Identity, however, has been given considerable attention in retention research. Despite its favour in literature, identity is challenging to define, and authors use various definitions throughout their studies. I base the definition of identity adopted throughout this project on Erikson's 1950s

research. It defines identity as '...people's concepts of who they are, of what sort of people they are, and how they relate to others...' (Hogg and Abrams 1988, p. 2 cited in Fearon 1999, p. 4). This definition encourages us to look beyond the individual and examine how they see themselves relating to others and their environments.

Like the multiple concepts of motivation and integration, there is no single theory of identity encompassing every aspect or used consistently throughout the persistence literature. Instead, studies draw on early identity theories to inform their research while focusing on distinct areas such as identity centrality, identity salience, and self-concept. The following section introduces these three areas, providing an overview of literature pertinent to academic persistence.

Defined as 'the extent to which a dimension of one's identity is important to one's self-image or definition of oneself' (Rosenberg 1979, cited in Bowman and Felix 2017, p. 236), identity centrality suggests some students identify first and foremost as 'a student'. Identifying as 'a student' has long since been considered helpful to academic persistence and links to students' ability to fit in with classmates and institutional discourses (Harvey *et al.*, 2006). For many students, however, embracing a new student identity can be challenging. For some students, particularly those we might consider non-traditional, identity has formed throughout their earlier lives. Taking on their new student identity can mean letting go of their past and current identity.

Research has suggested that 'student identity centrality' may help academic persistence, based on findings that those with high identity centrality often engage in behaviours and activities that support that identity (Bowman and Felix 2017). Students exhibiting student identity centrality are more inclined to socialise with other students, be engaged with college events, and spend more time studying than their peers, all of which are examples of activities linked to enhanced persistence. While identity centrality encourages these interactions and studying, it can also help in challenging situations. For example, where problems arise, students with low identity centrality may find obstacles too difficult to overcome and eventually give in to those obstacles. Those with high identity centrality are, in contrast, more likely to persist, as they view withdrawal as losing their central identity. Using scales to identify identity centrality and other accepted predictors of persistence such as integration, Bowman and Felix identified a positive correlation between identity centrality and intent to complete, at a similar level to the more widely understood and accepted predictor of integration. Importantly, students with high identity centrality demonstrated its buffering effect against outside pressures and stresses, suggesting that students whose primary identity is 'a student' can better cope with challenges and are, therefore, more likely to persist.

However, student identity centrality may not always be critical to persistence, and a more nuanced version of persistence is proposed (Kinney-Walker 2015). Other factors, such as support and goal commitment, are also required. In Kinney-Walker's relatively small-scale study, all four participants persisted, despite a mix of identity centrality levels. While student identity was important, other identities such as race and family background, were equally valuable. These multiple identities suggested that identity salience, rather than centrality, was more critical.

In contrast with identity centrality, the identity salience concept refers to the weight or importance we attach to different areas of our identity. Those areas more 'salient' are likely to be the identity we bring to a situation (Stryker and Serpe 1994). Our more salient identities are easier to invoke as we are most confident and comfortable with them. Trent *et al.* (2020) also explored identity salience and its contribution to academic outcomes. Their research, focusing on doctoral students of colour, identified how racial identity salience could simultaneously increase awareness of 'difference' and increase resilience in the face of challenges. While racial identity awareness often increased due to negative experiences such as racism, these negative experiences prepared them for their identity of 'difference' at university. They described their racial identity salience as a 'double-edged sword' as the negativity it created 'armed them with the grit and resilience necessary to persevere' (p. 7). Similarly, Ramos and Yi (2020) found that female doctoral students of colour needed strong coping mechanisms to overcome potential oppression.

Dorimé-Williams (2018) found that promoting scientific identity for students in science programs without losing sight of students' 'other' identities was beneficial. Accepting and 'embrac[ing] students as complex human beings' (p. 8), the research suggests that open conversations can support students to 'integrate their multiple identities' (p. 9). This finding corroborates Kinney-Walker's finding that identity salience, rather than identity centrality, is vital in supporting persistence.

Studies of students' identity often focus on non-traditional students or shifts in identity during and after transition periods. Few pay attention to college students, where students' non-traditional status is often unlike the non-traditional status assumed of higher education students. Analysing the difficulties associated with aligning non-traditional students' identities with the 'norms' of higher education is common in retention studies. Research often suggests misalignment as one reason for withdrawal or lack of success. However, college environments are often assumed to be more in line with students from lower socio-economic backgrounds and with lower academic ability, attracting students who would otherwise find university beyond their reach. As such, we might expect colleges to be filled with students who, although not considered traditional, are equal in terms of status and ability.

Jameson and Fusco (2014) found lower self-efficacy among adult students, while self-concept did not differ based on non-traditional student status. They note their findings could be, in part, due to their classification of 'non-traditional' students. Using the US-based National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) classifications, rather than defining non-traditional as age-based alone, their non-traditional students were not necessarily older than their traditional students. Instead, their non-traditional students may have taken time out between school and university, studied part-time, worked full-time, been financially independent, single parents or without a high school diploma.

Kaba and Talek's (2015) study of undergraduate students in Thailand relates self-concept to academic achievement. Based on Liu and Wang's (2005) academic self-concept scale, their study quantitatively analysed the relationship between academic effort and achievement to identify differences in age, gender, and levels of study. While other studies have noted that males' academic self-concept is higher than that of females (Kling *et al.* 1999), this study found no such relationship. Also addressing self-concept with maths students, Jameson and Fusco (2014) studied adult undergraduates in a US University. Their participants self-described using a Likert scale to measure self-concept, along with self-efficacy and maths anxiety, which the researchers used to draw comparisons between traditional and adult students. Research suggests self-concept is a strong predictor of academic achievement, with a synergistic relationship between self-concept and task value (Guo *et al.* 2016). These quantitative studies demonstrate a mix of findings, none of which describe in any detail how students' self-concept is experienced or develops over time.

In contrast, a qualitative study by Yeung *et al.* (2014), in which the authors interviewed participants to understand the development of self-concept, revealed links with social and environmental structures and influences. Conceptualising individuals' self-concept as 'dynamic and multidimensional' (p. 11) and asserting its emergence through social activity, the study suggests that we should look at self-concept within social contexts. Their findings identified a strong relationship between self-efficacy and self-concept. This relationship suggests that students' competence and authenticity are critical both to motivation and in forming self-concept. Self-concept change links to self-concept formation, and social comparison can alter self-concept as it increases consciousness levels and motivation (Ugur 2015).

It is worth noting that, in persistence literature, self-concept is often discussed or confused with self-efficacy. While self-efficacy relates to an individual's perceived ability to complete a specific task successfully, however, self-concept is described '...in very broad terms…[as] a person's perception of himself' (Shavelson *et al.* 1976 p. 411, cited in Bong and Skaalvik 2003,

p. 3). While education studies often focus on 'academic self-concept', which brings it closer to the concept of self-efficacy, self-concept remains a more generalised term.

Emotion

As most early retention and persistence studies focused on predicting outcomes and searching for reasons that lead to withdrawal, they somewhat neglected the emotional aspects of withdrawal and persistence. However, there has now been a shift towards understanding the withdrawal process and students' experiences. There remains a lack of literature relating to emotions and the lived experience of persistence, but several studies have begun to unpick our students' various emotions. Christie *et al.* (2008) suggest 'learning is…profoundly…emotional' (p. 567), with the potential to bring insecurities and vulnerabilities to the fore. Experiencing challenges in their academic or personal lives can heighten students' emotions, and an examination of how experiences affect students' wellbeing and adjustment to college is vital (Pritchard and Wilson 2003). Leaving home, family, and friends, to begin a new life stage where new places and friends become an integral part of new experiences, brings emotional challenges, some of which can prove too demanding. For many students, the new structures, processes, pressure and relationships experienced in the college environment can prove overwhelming (Mandracchia and Pendleton 2015). Several studies have looked towards emotional intelligence (EI) to aid withdrawal predictions, while others have focused on coping with emotions. Some have drawn links between rises in mental illness and withdrawal. This section draws attention to the importance of emotion and introduces studies that use emotions to predict withdrawal or illuminate students' emotions during their persistence.

The transition from school to university can be filled with stress, particularly as students forge new relationships and alter longstanding relationships while learning and functioning in new environments (Parker *et al.* 2006). Focusing on EI's prediction value, Parker *et al.* (2006) looked at intra- and interpersonal abilities, adaptability, and ability to manage stress using the emotional quotient inventory (EQI). They identified higher EI in those who persisted. While the links the authors draw between EI and persistence are noteworthy and in line with other similar research, we should treat their results with caution. There was, for example, no follow-up survey completed to ascertain any changes in EI over time. Based solely on the EQI, the study does not account for the differences, difficulties, or experiences of the individuals surveyed. The authors considered the group to be homogenous in that all students entered their first year of a full-time university course within 24 months of leaving school. However, there is no further information to suggest the group had similar backgrounds, home lives, or personal and academic challenges. Based entirely on data returned from the EQI survey, the study provided no opportunity for students to articulate their emotions or share their experiences. Instead, the research analysed

patterns arising from survey responses based on a Likert scale. While research of this type is valuable, it cannot offer real insight into those students' emotions. As a result, any opportunity to focus on the students' unique experiences and offer potential support to students in the future is lacking.

In a more nuanced study, Qualter *et al.*'s (2009) findings suggest a link between EI and persistence among some student groups. Based on a small group of students in a UK university, the researchers sought to determine the effectiveness of an intervention designed to address low EI. Comparing the efficacy across students with low, high, and average EI, the study included a control group who did not access the intervention. The intervention did not impact students with high EI, who showed withdrawal results similar to the control group. In contrast, the intervention positively impacted those with low EI. Withdrawal rates among this group were lower than the control group, but withdrawals were higher among those with average EI. While the average EI group's findings may be unexpected, the authors suggest that this could be due to the intervention type or length. They regard students with high EI as already more aware of their difficulties and more inclined to seek support. Those with low EI may have found the interventions helpful in clarifying the support available and encouraging them to use it. The study suggests that an intervention focusing on EI could increase EI enough to enable students to '…address…stressors and to establish meaningful relationships so that they no longer feel the need to withdraw from their studies in an attempt to reduce stress' (p. 227). These meaningful relationships point us back to the work of Tinto and his theory of integration, demonstrating that we may learn more by combining psychological and sociological approaches. The findings from studies such as these are valuable. However, based on quantitative data from self-report surveys, they cannot help us understand human emotion. Instead, they use students' perceived ability to cope with their emotions, attempting to locate causes and solutions to the 'retention puzzle'. While the initiatives may prove helpful for future students, the research did not focus on the emotions underpinning those initiatives. A study of this nature cannot highlight the emotions at play, how students have experienced those emotions, or the effect of those emotions.

Relationships between EI and academic success may exist for some students, but this could differ between undergraduate and postgraduate levels. EI characteristics can differ according to the subject and career aspiration, particularly when considering maturity levels and ability to cope with challenges (Beauvais *et al.* 2014). It seems likely that different subjects will attract different characteristics, yet it also seems likely that personal experience and situations will impact EI and coping ability. EI may naturally increase over time (Beauvais *et al.* 2014; Parker *et al.* 2006), which suggests undergraduate and postgraduate EI are likely to differ.

We can study EI in its entirety or through branches such as identifying and managing emotions. Identifying and managing emotions links to coping styles, and research has used these to address withdrawal and persistence questions further. Coping styles may be significant for persistence, and an 'active dispositional style' can reportedly predict persistence decisions (Lesure-Lester 2003). Active coping, including planning and positive reinterpretation and growth, involves actively working towards reappraising difficult situations and carrying out some action to reduce or remove the stressor. Actions will differ according to individuals and their situation, but seeking change and taking control of the situation is likely to improve chances of success. It also points to the benefits of agency, discussed in more detail later in this chapter.

Despite the numerous studies linking EI to withdrawal and persistence, it remains under constant debate. Goleman's EI model, which often underlies current studies, focuses on self-awareness, self-regulation, social skills, empathy, and motivation. However, it attracts criticism for its reliance on self-perception (Conte 2005). This self-perception may ignore individuals' actual ability in terms of EI, a factor potentially undermining its use (Daus and Ashkanasy 2003). EI, developed in childhood, can be strengthened over time (Beauvais *et al.* 2014; Parker *et al.* 2006). As it changes, measuring EI is complex. Indeed, like researchers in retention and persistence, EI researchers are, at times, conflicted in what to measure and how to measure it (Landy 2005). While EI may have a place within persistence research, alternatives may offer more significant insight. For example, emotional problem-solving may be more suitable for workplace research (Daus and Ashkanasy 2003). The complex world of college and its associated emotional challenges may also benefit from emotional problem-solving research.

As discussed earlier in this chapter, the challenge of navigating college often links to motivation, yet students' motivation has links to emotions and coping. The need achievement theory, particularly fear of failure, can provide insight into dealing with academic or emotional setbacks. We can divide students who fear failure into categories: those who strive for success through extra effort and those who strive to self-protect by avoiding dealing with their fear of failure through engagement in detrimental activity (Covington 1992, cited in Simons *et al.* 1999). While those striving for success may be better equipped to achieve it, however, their focus on avoiding failure by exerting additional effort will still, at times, not lead to success. In those cases, Covington reminds us that failure can be challenging. The pessimism and defensiveness often demonstrated by those who aim to self-protect can manifest as a lack of effort and attendance. While we might immediately see such effort or lack thereof as motivation-related, individuals may be employing coping strategies developed over time through school and home activities. The emotional side-effects of failing to achieve when students have pushed themselves to do well could reduce confidence and self-worth based on disappointment and upset. In contrast, those

who have chosen to exert little or no effort may be concealing their emotions. However, we must consider both groups' emotions, as the effect of failure can be long-term and may reveal underlying issues. Among the underlying issues is poor mental health, and like awareness of mental health difficulties, research linking mental health and persistence has risen in recent years. In particular, anxiety, which is prevalent among student populations (Strahan, 2003), is widely discussed in teaching and learning literature. In turn, it is now filtering through to retention and persistence research.

Anxiety can be beneficial in some cases; a degree of test anxiety can, for example, help students improve academic performance. For others, it can trigger a lack of attendance and decreased motivation (England *et al.* 2017). 'Cold-calling' on students to provide answers, difficulty understanding the subject matter, and the fear of looking less able than their peers induced anxiety in England *et al.*'s study of active learning situations. However, despite this, such active learning practices were not significant to persistence. While the study found higher levels of general anxiety among those who withdrew, students with lower scores also felt more anxious. Whether the anxiety or the lower scores impacted these students' persistence is unclear; however, the authors concluded that anxiety contributes to persistence.

Research suggests that around 22% of students display clinical levels of social anxiety (Strahan 2003). This is a worrying statistic, but it is not necessarily significant in predicting withdrawal. Strahan found that students with high emotional control were more inclined to withdraw. While we might expect students with high emotional control to cope well with stressful situations, her research proposes that these students are so entrenched in their need to control and hide their emotions that they fail to connect with others. Those students may fail to seek the necessary support and, ultimately, withdraw. With the stigma of withdrawal potentially causing as much anxiety as remaining in college, it remains unclear how colleges can provide support.

As with other retention and persistence research areas, studies of emotions and coping often focus on prediction and intervention. While studies, including some of those mentioned above, provide excerpts from student narratives and qualitative themes, a real sense of their emotions often remains hidden. However, regardless of where or how it ends, if the student journey is emotional, we must attempt to understand the emotions involved. Using those emotions to predict outcomes seems counterintuitive and conflicts with the aims of the current study. Emotions are uniquely individual and part of personal student journeys; formalising and adapting those emotions to fit with predictive models risks losing that individuality and personality.

Agency

Student-centred approaches to learning and teaching have been written about over decades and in various guises. While it is out with this study's scope to elaborate on each area of student-centred learning, the idea of control (in particular, agency) warrants some discussion. Compared to many other concepts (e.g., self-efficacy, motivation, integration), learner agency is relatively under-researched. It is, however, often discussed briefly in the literature relating to academic persistence. Often mentioned in passing, broad views tend towards accepting agency as significant in persistence, yet few studies focus solely on agency's link to persistence. What follows are examples of how research links agency with other concepts.

Agency does not stand alone but instead intertwines with many aspects of student life. Interventions to increase students' sense of agency often attempt to give students a 'voice'. Motivation, opportunities for self-regulation, and agency can be critical to the student voice. Interventions such as '…student voice programs demonstrate a commitment to the facilitation of student agency and to the creation of policies, practices, and programs that revolve around the students' interests and needs' (Toshalis and Nakkula 2012, p. 23). However, agency is complex, comprises several elements, and has been added to and altered through the years. One commonly cited definition of agency is that from Gao (2010, cited in Mercer 2011; cited in Manyukhina and Wyse 2019), who describes agency as 'an individual's will and capacity to act'. For this section, I adopt Gao's definition as a starting point. However, individuals' will and capacity to act is not solely internal or psychological (Bandura 2006). Instead, individuals act within systems that affect their will and capacity, while their will and capacity affect those systems. This more nuanced approach to agency has led to new and fuller descriptions of agency, including socio-ecological agency (Schoon 2018).

In early research, Thomas (1980) sought to determine the value and practicality of increasing learner agency. Two particularly relevant studies that Thomas discussed outlined agency as crucial. Firstly, the work of Coleman *et al.* (1966) described 'a student's sense of control over the environment…[as] the single best predictor of academic achievement among black…[students]' (p. 219). Secondly, he noted Maehr's (1976) emphasis on 'the importance of instilling a sense of agency in students' (p. 231). Thomas reminds us of the importance of the 'sense' of control or agency in both instances. These quotes suggest that the ability to control is not necessarily students' main requirement; instead, they need to believe they have some sense of control. A sense of agency can enhance the time students are academically engaged, their achievements, and their behaviours relating to achievement (Thomas 1980). Rather than a sense of agency as 'the answer' to persistence, therefore, it becomes a conduit to other persistence-enhancing factors.

Processes and procedures considered 'normal' within society and institutions guide and shape behaviours within them; our interactions then work either within the 'normal' boundaries, governed by others' power or against those boundaries through our exertion of power. When acting within boundaries, we manage ourselves to fit with expectations. While this idea originates within Foucauldian Governmentality (Hutchinson and O'Malley 2019), research has used it to understand agency among students. One such study by Zepke *et al.* (2009) analysed learners' experiences to reveal three themes: institution/individual relationships, group formation, and self-discipline. Participants in the study all persisted, and it is unclear whether any had considered withdrawing. As a result, the research cannot confidently show any agency or governmentality differences between those who completed and those who did not. However, learners reported not sensing an authoritarian role played by the organisation. Students were willing to adopt a disciplinary position with non-conforming group members, and their behaviours changed to fit with expectations and become 'normal'. The learners' inherent nature, to conform with their environment, led them to conform and reduced the need for distinct and visible authority from the institution, lessening the students' awareness of the institution's authoritarian role. In contrast, those who withdrew may have been non-conforming and therefore more inclined to meet with authority.

Linking agency to hope theory, Kibby (2015) focussed on students' positive perceptions and goals, moving away from traditional deficit models of student persistence. Hope theory suggests that hope is 'a positive motivational state…based on an interactively derived sense of successful…agency…and… pathways…' (Snyder *et al.* 1991, p. 287). To have hope, we need a desire to achieve a goal and a plan to achieve it. As we encounter difficult situations and traumatic events, our stress increases, and we lose the will to pursue our goals (Snyder 2002). Instead, we opt for the safety and comfort of the status quo – we are less inclined to try new things and stretch our abilities. Academic life presents difficult situations; whether we receive a lower-than-expected grade for our effort in an exam, or we find ourselves struggling to understand an area of study, students face challenges. Coupled with difficult academic days, students often have personal challenges to deal with. Without hope, students encountering such difficulties may accept the problems and avoid future challenges. In contrast, with hope, they might see a way forward. Kibby's research involved embedding activities designed to increase goal setting in line with students' strengths, aiming to enhance agency and develop hope. Setting goals and giving students tools to work towards those goals while navigating circumstances and selecting alternative pathways where necessary, participants' agency thinking enhanced. Recognition of experiences and expertise, valuing their personal opinions and giving students a choice, enhanced agency thinking and reduced withdrawal rates. As with most persistence studies, whether persistence was a direct result of the initiative or not is debatable. However, Kibby's assertion

that students require tools to make informed choices, and that choice can positively impact a sense of agency, offers possibilities to the students and the institutions that strive to enhance agency among their student populations. Hope and gratitude also correlate with academic integration and institutional commitment, indicating that both can support achievement and persistence (Browning *et al.* 2018).

Merrill (2015) demonstrated varying levels of agency through two participants. Comparing a student who had withdrawn with one who had completed, her biographical study reminds us how a sense of agency differs among individuals and their circumstances. While both participants displayed a sense of agency, they did so in different ways. With different 'dispositions', the students had entered their studies for different reasons and dealt with challenges differently. While one student was engaged, committed, and demonstrated a thirst for her subject and a desire to change her life course, the other showed no such feelings. Instead, she felt pushed into studying through circumstance and was driven to persist only by lack of choice. Believing studying was her only option, and despite her attempts to remain, the student withdrew from her course. While we cannot be sure what led to this withdrawal, we can draw links between these circumstances and Kibby's research – a perceived lack of choice may have reduced her sense of agency and led to withdrawal. Although unable to draw complete conclusions regarding agency and persistence, this research demonstrates how agency can support persistence and how agency is impacted by individuals' dispositions, background, and circumstances, none of which we can ignore when dealing with the complex nature of academic persistence.

Various forms of 'capital' can link to agency, and O'Shea's (2015) study found this helpful in her study of non-traditional students. Aspirational capital, or the ability to continue to hold hope for the future despite challenges, may help pull students towards their studies. In this sense, students use their hopes for the future as a form of motivation to help them through difficult times. We might assume familial capital (the knowledge and culture learned from family and friends) to be lacking and problematic for first-generation students, particularly as they have no frame of reference among family members or advice from parents or siblings. However, O'Shea's participants demonstrated how familial capital takes many forms. Despite not having family or friends with shared university experience, they could rely on those close to them for support and guidance through difficult times. Family members grew proud of their achievements, offering additional motivation. Challenging perceived limitations and demonstrating oppositional behaviour (resistant capital) showed the most robust sense of agency among O'Shea's participants. They resisted other people's opinions and expectations of their potential and perceived potential based on social class and gender expectations. Embracing their aspirational and familial capital while resisting the status quo, participants demonstrated a sense of agency

unexpected among a non-traditional student population. What might initially appear as threatening their sense of agency, participants instead used to enhance it.

The research discussed above demonstrates the difficulty of using agency as a central concept for understanding persistence. It invariably links to multiple other ideas such as motivation and hope. While none of the studies discussed used agency as a standalone concept for predicting completion or understanding persistence, they point to agency as unique to the individual and embedded in individuals' personalities, circumstances, backgrounds, and aspirations. They also show how institutions themselves can affect individuals' sense of agency.

To address agency within academic persistence studies, we might turn to Schoon's (2018) concept of socio-ecological agency. Rather than foregrounding individuals' inner capacities for decision-making or taking control at the expense of the social and organisational factors in which individuals exist, Schoon attempts to integrate learner agency with the structures and interactions of society, family, history, and organisations. She reminds us that while individuals may display a sense of agency, their behaviour is not entirely internally determined. Instead, their surroundings, events and identities shape their agency. We do not exist in a 'social vacuum' (p. 19), and so our agency is relational, emerging through interactions with structures and relationships. Suggesting agency is both 'learnable and malleable' (p. 8), socio-ecological agency allows organisations to promote opportunities for students to enhance their sense of agency, yet warns of the deep-rooted sense of agency that comes with experience, current situations and aspirations. Therefore, organisations and those within them must be aware of the conditions imposed on students and how individuals become interlinked with organisational structures and staff-student and student-student relationships.

2.5 Studies of Academic Persistence in Further Education

Research both in and about FE is lacking. Pockets of research exist within FE colleges, but the research is often 'incidental', and most adopt models and frameworks from other areas such as HE. Unlike in universities, the research culture within colleges is new. It has yet to build solid foundations and requires 'grand thinking as well as incremental research' (Doel 2021). Colleges offer a rich field of study, yet while studies relating to retention and academic persistence amount to many thousands, the vast majority are concerned with HE, with far fewer focussing on FE. A recent search of the University's library resources, filtered to include only peer-reviewed journals, returned 32 matches for the subject terms 'Further Education' and 'student retention' between 2000 and 2021. With 'Further Education' changed to 'Higher Education', the same resource returned 5,917 matches. Although these were not the only search terms or databases used during the literature review process, the significant variance between results demonstrates the lack of

research available within FE. Despite differences between HE and FE institutions, retention studies tend to be similar. This final section of the chapter outlines the limited peer-reviewed retention literature for FE.

A study of entry-level, Level 1 and Level 2 college courses investigated the effects of variables including gender, ethnicity, language, and social class on retention. The study found that males and certain ethnic minority groups were more prone to withdrawal at Level 1, while more white students withdrew at Level 2 (Bidgood *et al.* 2006). The most noteworthy results from the statistical analysis were that while gender was significant at all levels, age was not associated with withdrawal rates. These findings may align with other similar studies (Boero *et al.* 2005; Ohland *et al.* 2014; Robb *et al.* 2012), yet many studies disagree with the findings. For example, Barbera (2020) explains that academic subject can explain gender patterns. The SFC has recently published a strategy to address gender inequalities but highlights that only 30% of college Outcome Agreements highlight their students' success rates according to gender, making analysis difficult (SFC, 2019). However, studies focusing on the predictive value of gender cannot uncover reasons for withdrawal or completion, nor do they typically explore the students' persistence experiences.

In contrast, Buchanan and Sharma (2009) explore their students' reasons for withdrawal. Using exit surveys and follow-up telephone interviews, the authors categorised reasons for leaving as follows: change in study choice, employment, illness, personal and financial, program quality, and 'other'. With little difference between these categories and those found in similar HE studies (Aljohani 2016; Haverila *et al.* 2020), similarities between the two types of institutions and their students become increasingly apparent. While none of the categories of withdrawal may be unique to this particular institution, it is interesting that the researchers identified the majority of reasons as outside the institution's control. Again, however, the research cannot provide insight into the experiences of students who withdrew.

Like many HE studies that focus on targeted interventions, Bullock and Fertig's (2003) study investigated student and tutor perceptions of a personal tutoring service offered by a UK college. The authors identified the positives and negatives of the service and a difference in opinions between staff and students. While students valued the tutorials for social reasons, suggesting they provided them with a social base and helped them make friends who could improve persistence, tutors were more inclined to see tutorials as an opportunity to support learning. Although not viewed as a method for improving retention, tutors agreed that retention could be a by-product of the tutorials. One tutor commented that course content does not affect withdrawal, explaining that students know in advance what their courses will cover. Instead, they suggested that withdrawal is a result of environmental and social issues. From this, we can see that both students'

and tutors' perceptions of retention link closely to Tinto's ideas, with integration being critical. Unfortunately, some students in this intervention raised concerns that one-to-one personal tutor meetings were done 'to them'. Tinto's argument that 'students…do not seek to be retained. They seek to persist' (2016) seems, in this instance, to be backed up by students.

In another study of the effects of an intervention, Burns and Slack (2015) identified that financial incentive to persist had no significant impact on students above age 24. Their interviews revealed that retention improved during the intervention. However, contrary to expectations, the improvement was most notable in the under 24 group – those not receiving the financial incentive. In an unexpected turn, the study highlighted an adverse effect of the loans; there was an increasing divide between age groups. While research consistently cites financial difficulties as one of the reasons for withdrawal (Bland 2018; Webb and Cotton 2018), in this case the additional finance was not significantly helpful regarding retention. Instead, with loans provided to a group based solely on age rather than personal circumstance, younger students felt unfairly disadvantaged. Moreover, while the loans were an incentive to remain on courses, students with difficulties that may have been better dealt with through withdrawal may have felt pressured into persisting for fear of financial penalty.

Rogers (2009) studied the effects of a more personal intervention. Her research, seeking to identify what students value within an institution, found that students value psycho-social support, consistency and availability, and staff who demonstrate personal investment in them. The relationships built between staff and students varied, with some staff offering what the students perceived as better support than others. While one student discussed the strength of a relationship based on its informality, others felt they benefitted more from the staff's formal support than from the support offered by friends and family on account of it being more 'informed support'. Isolation and a lack of support were, for one student, crucial in his withdrawal decision. For an otherwise motivated student, this case again highlights the importance of integration with students and staff.

Wood (2012), whose research focused on black male students' experiences in a community college, identifies with Rogers' finding that students want personal investment from staff. In his study, students described staff looking for students to '…prove their interest and engagement…' (p. 31) before they were content to invest in them. However, if students look to their tutors to invest in them before building relationships with them, and tutors look for students to be active in class before investing in them, the result is an impasse. The perception of black male students in Wood's study, and arguably the perception of many students from a non-traditional background, is that others view them as less able than their peers. Potentially leading to anxiety and fear of contributing in class, tutors' lack of interaction with students may worsen this and is

unlikely to foster students' persistent attitudes. Wood concludes that several themes can help create a productive environment for students: initiate and maintain contact, illustrate a friendly and caring demeanour, affirm, and encourage, check on student progress, and listen to student concerns. While these may not be the only factors necessary to support students' persistence, they are undoubtedly some of the most institutionally controllable elements.

Zorbas, O'Neill and Chapman (2004) also note staff investment in students. A simple statement from a student is revealing: 'I like the class better when I find the lecturer cares about you' (pg. 340). The authors identified three themes among their participants: the importance of completing, the learning environment, and external factors. All students recognised the importance of completing their courses. However, students who completed their courses focused on completion to transfer to a university; those who withdrew viewed it in terms of gaining employment. With the potential to gain employment without a college certificate but access to university impossible without it, this could be an essential factor in withdrawal decisions. While all participants considered their classes long and uninteresting, the non-completers were less aware of the course's structure and topics before starting. This finding suggests that those who completed had researched their courses in advance, potentially signalling higher motivation among the group. The study, again, highlights the complexity of persistence, demonstrating there is seldom one reason for withdrawal.

In the few FE studies, like those concentrating on HE, there is little attention paid to the experience of persistence. Often, studies concentrate on specific characteristics or variables (Burns and Slack 2015). However, the interconnections between factors make it difficult, and perhaps undesirable, to study these factors as discrete. The human element of academic persistence, combined with the social, psychological, and organisational factors at play in students' education journeys, makes it a subject requiring rich, in-depth inquiry to fully understand the nuances in students' persistence.

2.6 Chapter Summary

The literature review shows that interest in student retention and persistence has been prolific for many years. Interests and study types have changed over the decades, yet the focus on some of the earliest seminal works and ideas remains. Tinto's model arguably retains the most compelling explanations regarding student persistence. Still, there have been attempts to expand the model to provide practical solutions to a long-term 'problem' within institutions. The complex nature of the human condition ensures that the subject's nuances are further complicated. In turn, this complexity will prove the validity of any model challenging (Swail 2004).

The vast majority of studies remain interested in withdrawal reasons and interventions. As a result, they tend to be quantitative and descriptive, with little emphasis on understanding the students' lived experience. There remains relatively little research in FE colleges, with most research carried out in HE institutions (often based on students who transferred from FE). A great deal of the research remains focused on specific groups of students, for example, Latino, Black, Male, Widening Participation, Nursing and STEM. On the other hand, there is less research concentrating on the general FE population across various courses. Studies still tend to fall into the six categories Spady defined half a century ago, with prediction and interventions the overarching focus. Ideas from the early works of Tinto, Spady, and Bean continue to provide foundations upon which to build, with a combination of psychological, sociological, and organisational approaches still standard. However, in recent years there has been a move to accept these approaches as complementary rather than conflicting.

The lack of research relating to students' lived experience, either withdrawing or completing, means we have little understanding of how they experience their situations. The current literature fails to reveal actual human experience and, without this understanding, gaining any significant progress will continue to be unattainable. Similarly, the current lack of research in the FE field halts progress in FE as we rely on research from other areas. While studies in HE may be valuable for FE, the two forms of education remain separate and often incomparable.

The current study, in accepting that we cannot separate individuals and their attributes from the social world in which they live, nor the organisational structures of which they are a part, addresses this gap in the literature through the psychological lens of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). It seeks to understand the intensity of students' experiences of persistence within their social and organisational structures. It addresses the need for students' experiences to be heard, acknowledged and accepted as significant.

Chapter Three:
Research Methodology

Chapter Three: Research Methodology

Introduction

> I want to understand the world from your point of view. I want to know what you know in the way you know it. I want to understand the meaning of your experience, to walk in your shoes, to feel things as you feel them, to explain things as you explain them. Will you become my teacher and help me understand? (Spradley 1979, p.34 in Kvale 1996).

The current study attempts to understand and provide a detailed examination of participants' experiences of academic persistence. It does this by adopting an Interpretative Phenomenological approach, using in-depth and semi-structured interviews.

This chapter introduces the changing landscape of retention research and outlines the methodology used in the project, providing a brief background to phenomenology and its relevance to the current study. It shows how, following a pilot study, I developed the project's design to suit the research questions' needs. Finally, it describes the ethical considerations that informed the project's development and provides some detail regarding researcher reflexivity.

3.1 Rationale for Methodology

Chapter Two demonstrated that, despite the abundance of student retention studies over 80 years, scholars continue to debate reasons, problems, and models (see McNeely 1937; Spady 1970; Tinto 1975 and 1999; Bean 1980; Bean and Eaton 2000). Nevertheless, there remains a lack of understanding regarding how students experience academic persistence. As we have seen, much of the evidence arising from empirical studies has been quantitative, focusing on self-report surveys and other measures of students' variables to predict outcomes. While the research which focuses on withdrawal and persistence reasons provides a valuable starting point, it ignores the student experience. It helps us target interventions at those most at risk of withdrawal, but it cannot help us understand how it feels to be at risk, nor how to work with those students sensitively. It problematises specific student groups and encourages interventions that attempt to 'fix' them. Often, the research identifies challenges as though they are discrete and related to an individual area; they ignore the links between the psychological, sociological, and organisational factors at play throughout a student's journey.

However, the nature of retention studies is changing, encouraging a greater focus on the individual and encouraging research that foregrounds experience and meaning-making. Using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), the current study recognises the changing landscape of retention research and focuses on individuals' experiences to understand the

academic persistence phenomenon. It seeks to reveal students' often-hidden experiences through their first-hand narratives, providing insight into experiences otherwise often ignored by retention research. This unique insight highlights students' emotions and challenges and offers valuable evidence to inform professional practice, addressing the following research questions:

1. What is the lived experience of students who have considered withdrawal but persisted with their studies?
2. How does this experience develop over time?
3. What potential changes to professional practice, if any, arise from the study?

Changes in Retention and Persistence Studies

The changes emerging in retention research are encouraging a greater focus on the individual. In line with this, it seems appropriate that shifts in research design and methodologies also emerge. This section describes how researchers are moving towards qualitative research to focus on and understand students' experiences.

The increased focus on the individual encourages research that foregrounds experience and meaning-making. Recent qualitative studies include Awad's (2014) study of foreign language learners' motivation to persist. Awad's research reports a case study methodology, in which in-depth, semi-structured interviews were carried out with the language learners, leading to the emergence of several themes. Garza *et al.* (2014) used a mixed-methods approach to determine the perceived factors of retention among second-generation and Hispanic students. Their qualitative methodology again sought to find emerging themes from interviews with participants by looking specifically at the relationships between self-efficacy, resilience and retention. Winston (2011) used Interactive Qualitative Analysis, described as a system that '…uses grounded theory to advance qualitative methodologies' (p. 69). Using focus groups and interviews, she examined the graduate experience, influences upon that experience, relationships between students and external forces, and possible support students could access. Wirth and Padilla (2008) also used focus groups to complete a qualitative matrix that they then used to identify themes of potential barriers to success. A study of second-year university students by Loh *et al.* (2020) merged Tinto's early research with self-determination theory to develop an 'ecological system model'. Interviewing students to identify aspects they felt had motivated and discouraged their persistence during their studies, the authors explored 'motivators' and 'blockers' at various ecological levels.

Using a resilience framework to analyse the risk of and protection from withdrawal, Cotton *et al.* (2017) explored the experiences of student care leavers and those on National Scholarships. The

authors identified supportive networks of family and friends and financial support as persistence-enhancing and concluded that we must challenge the 'deficit model' often used in retention studies. The student voice and the increase in qualitative research may be beginning that challenge as we begin to address students' lived experiences. Ashour (2019) used qualitative phenomenological analysis to understand the lived experiences of withdrawn students. Although he focuses on students who have withdrawn, Ashour's assertion that 'quantitative methods and longitudinal samples…cannot address the complexity of the intermingled factors contributing to dropping out' (p. 362) reflects the current study's view.

Research has often ignored or marginalised undergraduate student voices (Therrell and Dunneback 2015). However, like the current study, those mentioned above focus on the human experience and bring the student voice to life. The dialogue between researcher and participants offers rich insight into the participants' lifeworlds, unlike surveys and questionnaires. The opportunity to openly discuss their experiences demonstrates to participants a genuine interest in their stories and encourages them to share what they may have previously kept hidden. For researchers, this new and previously unheard dialogue offers unique insight. For participants, it provides a safe place to share and shows them their experiences are valuable.

IPA is one method of researching the lived experience, and it is becoming more widely accepted within education research. Several studies have shown its worth in projects that combine education with other disciplines, some with a particular interest in the experiences of those who demonstrate persistence. Its typical reliance on open, semi-structured interviews and the focus on their narratives allow us to hear the participants' voices. It moves us from understanding participants as numbers, with experiences we might compare, contrast and count, to understanding their experiences as uniquely individual and significant.

The methodology, initially used in psychology research, is now widespread in health and social sciences (Peat *et al.* 2019). Despite being relatively new to educational research, IPA does appear in various studies relating to educational persistence (Cassidy *et al.* 2020; Denovan and Macaskill 2013; Derrington 2007; Ecklund 2013; Flink and Leonard 2019; Jungert 2008; Kingston 2008). For example, IPA studies in nursing and midwifery education have sought to understand student experiences relating to their courses' challenges. In particular, themes emerging from research in midwifery education include 'challenging starts' and 'developing strategies', with references to participants' strength and determination to succeed (Carolan-Olah *et al.*, 2014). Similar findings from Latina pre-nursing students reported experiences of 'seeking help', 'persevering', and personal determination (Nadeau 2014). Comments such as 'I don't like to give up very easily. I'm very, like, persistent,' and 'I know that if I really try…I will excel with anything I do' (pp.

10–11) remind us that, '…as theorized by Bandura…[there are] close connections between self-efficacy and persevering' (p. 11).

Epistemological Positioning

The current study draws on IPA to gain a deeper understanding of academic persistence in FE. It aims to understand participants' experiences of an '…uncertain, ambiguous, idiosyncratic, changeful…' world, and not a scientific world of absolute principles concerned with accuracy and certainty (Crotty 1998, p. 28). Based on constructivism and rejecting the view that knowledge and truth exist independently, it holds that knowledge and meaning do not merely exist and await discovery in the world. Instead, we construct knowledge and meaning through our interactions with the world (Gordon 2009). The study does not attempt to 'discover' meaning. Instead, it attempts to understand the meanings that individuals ascribe to and construct from their experiences. Individuals interpret their experiences, and while we cannot hold any interpretation as 'true', we must respect each unique experience and its interpretation.

Theoretical Perspective

This study is influenced mainly by hermeneutic phenomenology's ideas and principles to understand individual experiences. It attempts to interpret the descriptions of individuals' experiences to understand their meanings. Phenomenology undertakes '…to uncover the concealed meaning in lived experiences…', and hermeneutics involves '…interpret[ing] the meaning' (Bäckström and Sundin 2007, p. 244). Together, hermeneutic phenomenology encourages us to engage with and make sense of the experience as individuals describe it.

Husserl, accepted father of phenomenology, encouraged us to '…set aside all previous habits of thought...to learn to see what stands before our eyes' (1931, cited in Turgut and Irgin 2009, p. 762). His quest to '…go back to the things themselves…' (cited in Thumser 2020, p. 4) requires us to revisit our immediate experiences and see what appears before us without any connection to our lifeworld or other experiences (Moran 2000). This 'reduction' or 'bracketing', Husserl suggested, would allow new, enhanced meanings to emerge. Although accepted as valuable, later phenomenologists challenged Husserl's notion of bracketing, seeing it as idealism.

In particular, Heidegger argued that suspending all prior knowledge, experience, and understanding (our fore-structures) is unnecessary, undesirable and impossible. Instead, he suggested that researchers' fore-structures are integral to research. He rejected that we could, or should, adopt a 'presuppositionless' stance, explaining instead that we understand based on our character and our involvement in the world (Johnson 2000). Highlighting our inability to be anything other than 'in-the-world', Heidegger's phenomenology emphasised a need for

interpretation, suggesting objects do not always show themselves as they are. For Heidegger, therefore, hermeneutics was central to phenomenology. He explained the study of phenomena as a task that naturally undergoes interpretation, as our meanings and the world within which we construct those meanings are co-constituted (Conroy 2003).

3.2 Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)

Traditionally used in psychology but gaining in appreciation throughout the social sciences, IPA draws on the phenomenology described by Husserl and Heidegger. IPA, however, integrates phenomenology, hermeneutics and idiography.

Heidegger considered the hermeneutic circle or the '…the circularity of interpretation' to be an ontological problem (Mantzavinos 2009, p. 300). The hermeneutic circle is often described in terms of reading and making sense of a text; we enhance our understanding of individual parts of the text by reading the whole and vice versa (see Figure 2).

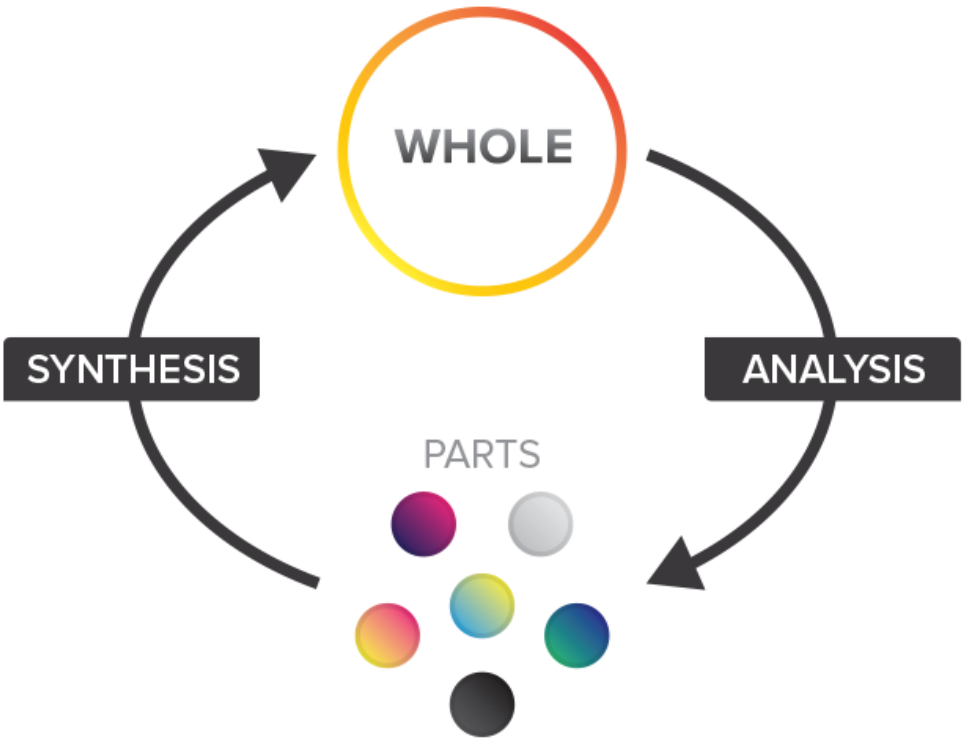


Figure 2 - Hermeneutic Circle

(Timmer 2015)

The hermeneutic circle is used in IPA to describe its iterative analysis process. Smith *et al.* (2009) draw our attention to the need to work through data analysis circularly, with one reading or analysis point shifting our understanding and providing new perspectives on meaning. IPA is concerned with getting as close to the participants' experience as possible through its iterative

focus. However, the researcher cannot share the participants' experiences; they can only endeavour to understand and interpret those experiences as participants describe them. As the participants interpret their lived experiences to make sense of them, the researcher faces a double hermeneutic, as they carry out '…sense-making…[in the]…second-order' (Smith *et al.* 2009, p. 36).

Influenced by idiography, IPA seeks detail and depth. This idiographic focus and a commitment to understanding particular phenomena from individuals' perspectives emphasise a need for few participants. Sample size depends on context, so there is no ideal number of participants. However, small participant numbers are manageable, allow for the depth of analysis sought in IPA, and provide rich data (Smith *et al.* 2009; Wagstaff *et al.* 2014).

A fundamental assumption of IPA is that humans are naturally self-reflecting. IPA suggests we use this self-reflection to explore and understand our participants' understanding and is '…committed to the examination of how people make sense of their major life experiences' (Smith *et al.*, 2009, p. 1). Aiming to bring us close to our participants' experiences, IPA enables us to offer a case-by-case analysis that searches for themes, patterns, convergence and divergence within the data. We can then present those themes both from a shared perspective and from the perspectives of individuals.

Methodological Selection

Selecting an appropriate research approach for this study was crucial. Acknowledging the ever-growing corpus of retention and persistence research and reflecting the need for greater insight into students' lived experience, a qualitative approach was fundamental. As Alase (2017, p. 9) points out, the decision can be 'daunting and tedious'. While the decision to adopt IPA for this study was not immediate, the research questions and the need to find a flexible approach that puts participants and their lived experiences at the heart of the study led me to IPA. While many researchers believe IPA is particularly 'participant oriented' and sensitive to their lived experiences (Alase 2017), this is not a view shared by all.

IPA is subject to criticism, and I considered these criticisms in turn. Firstly, IPA is a 'new' methodology. First used less than thirty years ago, IPA is less widely known and accepted than many other methodologies, yet it is becoming increasingly influential in multiple fields (Smith and Eatough 2019). While it is a new methodology, its foundations are not a 'new' philosophy. Instead, IPA places the traditional foundations of phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography within new researchers' reach. Addressing concerns 'that IPA is simply a form of thematic analysis with little emphasis on interpretation and is therefore, dare we say it, the easy option' (Hefferon and Gil-rodriguez 2011, p. 756) is essential. The 'interpretative' element of IPA is

fundamental to its success. Some IPA studies may not indicate this, but this is not a true reflection of IPA; instead, this shows that 'IPA is still a misunderstood and misapplied methodology' (Hefferon and Gil-rodriguez 2011, p. 759). Tuffour (2017) addresses queries relating to the role of language and of participants' abilities to communicate their experiences and the nuances within those experiences. Interviews are typical within IPA research, and they rely on open and in-depth communication which can be challenging for participants and researchers. However, returning to the interpretative requirement of IPA, we can see how the methodology does not rely on eloquence; in fact, the interpretation of language use such as pauses, stutters, and repetition can deepen our understanding of participants' narratives.

Critics argue that IPA attempts to 'operationalise' phenomenology, with researchers encouraged to follow step-by-step procedures outlined in the IPA literature (Pringle *et al.* 2011). Indeed, Smith *et al.* (2009) outline a step-by-step approach that undoubtedly helps new researchers focus and understand how to manage a research project. IPA makes interpretative phenomenological research accessible, but it balances accessibility with rigour (Larkin *et al.* 2006). Following the steps outlined in the IPA guides is not mandatory, and studies use various methods and procedures according to their needs. Throughout the current study, I used the framework discussed in IPA literature and adjusted it to suit my needs and preferences.

While some critics suggest that IPA is 'the easy option' (Hefferon and Gil-rodriguez 2011, p. 756), good IPA requires what Nizza *et al.* (2021) refer to as 'quality indicators'. A review of IPA studies published between1996 and 2008 led the authors to identify the following indicators: constructing a compelling, unfolding narrative; developing a vigorous experiential and/or existential account; close analytic reading of participants' words; and attending to convergence and divergence. The following section attends to each of these quality indicators in turn.

Constructing a narrative that compels and unfolds involves using participant extracts carefully and selectively. With readers unable to view transcripts in their entirety, selecting extracts that allow readers to follow the participants' stories and that remain true to the essence of the participants' experiences is crucial. While important, the extracts are only part of the narrative; the researcher combines extracts from participants to provide clarity and richness to the story. In the current study, this involved selecting extracts from multiple participants and ensuring the extracts and analytical comments came together to share the experience with readers. For an example of this, I refer you to pages 108, where various extracts from one participant (Chris) and their commentary build a picture of the participant's experiences over time.

Developing a vigorous experiential and/or existential account requires attentiveness to what participants' words mean for the individual. Participants may describe an event, but a simple

description could reveal more profound meaning and illuminate that event's significance. I refer you to page 155 for an example of this, where one participant (Adam) described a single episode that began to shed light upon his understanding of his place within the college.

Close analytic reading of participants' words helps researchers interpret, rather than simply accept, meaning. This interpretation involves thorough consideration of the transcript as a whole and of specific parts of that transcript, combined with a reflective approach to the participant's interview (for example, their body language). What might appear, on the surface, to be straightforward and descriptive can reveal subtleties when we pay close attention to the words. As an example, I refer you to a short extract from a participant (Taylor) on page 147, in which his words, when taken with his entire conversation, reveal far more than those words alone.

Finally, by attending to convergence and divergence, we can 'illustrate representation, prevalence and variability within the analysis' (Nizza *et al.* 2021, p. 8). IPA studies typically comprise small participant numbers, and each participant will have experienced the phenomenon under study. However, at first glance, the experiences of a phenomenon can be vastly different. The analysis process helps us uncover the similarities among participants' experiences, enabling us to reveal the convergence, usually *via* themes. While the convergence can arise naturally and somewhat expectedly through theme development, we must not exclude areas of divergence. This convergence and divergence are apparent on page 112, where a participant (Rebecca) shared an experience of transformation that was quite unlike the other participants.

In perhaps the most well-known critique of IPA, van Manen (2017, 2018) argues that IPA is, fundamentally, not phenomenological. His interpretation of IPA is that it is, instead, psychological. Indeed, he suggests that the acronym IPA should stand for Interpretative Psychological Analysis. Throughout their discussion, Smith (2018) rejects van Manen's appraisal of IPA and continues to argue that IPA is phenomenological. While not wishing to join their discussion, I learned from their conversation, and the critique did not dissuade me from using IPA as a methodology for this project. In his rebuttal to Smith, van Manen reminds us that the question 'what is it like?' underpins phenomenology (2018, p. 1963). That question remained at this project's heart throughout, as I have attempted to understand what it is like to persist in further education despite considering withdrawal.

In adopting a phenomenological approach to the study, I simultaneously rejected others. The following section provides a brief overview of the approaches considered but not subsequently chosen.

Narrative Inquiry

Initially, I considered narrative inquiry for the study. Based on the assumption that we use narrative to make sense of the world and our experiences, narrative inquiry and its potential to preserve the lived experience's complexity fit well with my early research plan. For those whose stories are typically unheard, narrative inquiry can offer a voice, and together those voices could prove more influential. However, I did not choose narrative inquiry for the study as it became clear that another methodology was better suited to the research questions. Using narrative inquiry, much of the focus would have been on how participants told their stories; as Wittgenstein suggests, 'the limits of my language are the limits of my world' (n.d., cited in Martland 1975, p. 19). From the outset of this project, it was clear that participants would have struggled, in some sense, throughout their studies. What was unknown was how they would have struggled and how they would articulate those struggles. At that stage, I could not rule out the possibility that some may not wish to disclose their experiences as 'stories'. A degree of narrative analysis did, however, influence the study. I did examine participants' narratives, and in some cases, there were clear 'stories'. While narrative and IPA overlap, however, the primary consideration for moving away from narrative inquiry towards IPA was the project's overall function - concentrating on the participants' experiences, not on how participants told their stories.

Phenomenography

Phenomenological and phenomenographic analysis exhibit many similar characteristics, as they are related by their ontological and epistemological assumptions. The focus of each, however, is different. Phenomenography 'does not ask about the nature of a phenomenon (as phenomenology does) but about how people experience, understand, and conceptualise a phenomenon' (Cossham 2017, p. 17). Originally developed from an educational framework, phenomenography aims to reveal how phenomena are understood. In contrast, phenomenology searches for structure and meaning (Larsson and Holmström 2007). This project aimed not to uncover how students understand or perceive academic persistence but to understand the phenomenon of academic persistence itself. While a phenomenographic approach would have focused on how participants conceptualised their persistence and sought to understand how they perceived it, this study focuses on how they experienced their persistence. In uncovering those experiences and developing a deeper understanding of the individuals' experiences, the study aims to provide insight into the experiences themselves.

3.3 Pilot Study

I conducted a pilot study between May and July 2016 to test the research process's adequacy and appropriateness, the main study's feasibility, and to determine whether the methodology was

appropriate for answering the research questions. I did not intend to write up findings, so I discontinued analysis once I generated themes. The pilot study tested recruitment, interview location, timing and scheduling, photograph elicitation, and journal entries. Reflection on each stage of the pilot study indicated a series of alterations that, when implemented, ensured the research process for the main study was robust and that the methods would generate valuable data. I outline each of the stages, reflections, and alterations of the pilot study below.

Recruitment

A member of the college's Student Support Staff identified potential participants who met the inclusion criteria as follows:

1. Participants must be current, full-time students on a further education course.
2. Participants must have considered withdrawing from their course on at least one occasion throughout the academic year.
3. Participants must be willing and able to share their experiences, be recorded while doing so, and have those (anonymised) experiences published as part of the final thesis.

She briefly explained the research project to potential participants and recommended contacting me, the researcher, if they were interested in participating. Three students were identified, and two of those participated in the pilot study.

Interviews

As the primary data collection method, productive interviews were crucial to the study's success. Therefore, I tested two interview sites, both within the participants' college. Ensuring participants could easily find the interview site minimised anxiety associated with navigating an unknown space. Both sites, selected for their relative quietness, proved adequate for the interviews; however, one offered a more informal environment than the other due to its layout and furniture, and this enhanced the atmosphere for interviewing.

Both participants attended interviews in May, which was the final month of their academic year. The date was chosen initially to ensure participants had persisted to the end of their course, but it became apparent that this was not appropriate. The participants' demanding schedules and impending deadlines caused the early termination of interviews and the abandonment of any follow-up interviews.

I developed an interview schedule, not to be viewed as a rigorous set of mandatory questions but rather as a guide to support the interview process. Reflecting on areas we hope will be covered during the interview, the schedule enables us to record prompts should the interviewee require

them and to consider our pre-conceptions or 'fore-structures' (Heidegger 2010, p. 151). Based on suggestions that a 45-90 minute interview can accommodate six to ten questions (Smith *et al.* 2009), the schedule comprised seven questions to follow initial discussions about any photographs and journal entries the participants brought to the interview.

Both participants were aware of the research interests, but neither saw the interview schedule in advance to avoid 'rehearsed' descriptions. The interview schedule provided some general areas about which to ask, gently probing the participant to encourage them to share their experiences. Beginning with 'easy' questions about their past experiences and reasons for studying allowed rapport to build as we moved through the interview, at which point the questioning turned to focus more explicitly on their experience of considering withdrawal. By asking more sensitive questions centred around the participants' feelings later in the interview, I ensured they were more comfortable both with the interview process and with me, the researcher. Asking questions such as 'how' and 'what' encouraged participants to share their experiences without leading them to share any particular feelings. This form of questioning allowed them to share what was important to them, and not on what they believed might benefit the study. In contrast, the schedule avoided focusing on 'why' questions which could appear judgemental.

In advance of the interview, I invited one participant to reflect on times during which she had considered withdrawing and on her experiences of persistence. I asked her to record anything she considered significant to or illustrative of her experiences in an online or paper-based journal. I also invited her to bring photographs of anything that reflected her experiences of persistence to the interview. The journal entries were to facilitate discussion only and were not for analysis. I expected she would find the use of a journal or photographs helpful for considering her thoughts in advance of the interview. In addition, I expected that focusing on what she had brought with her would help alleviate any nerves during the interview; rather than beginning the discussion from a blank canvas, the initial discussion could stem from the participant's pages or photographs, helping her feel in control and at ease with the situation. I did not ask the second participant to complete journal entries or bring photographs as I hoped to compare the ease of discussion.

Analysis

IPA does not prescribe one specific analysis method; it directs the researcher to focus on the participants and their experiences, and IPA literature proposes analysis strategies. The hermeneutic circle discussed earlier in the chapter can help us understand how we should handle text, including interview transcripts. Describing how an understanding of individual sections can help us understand the whole, the hermeneutic circle demonstrates that a sense of the whole can, similarly, provide a clearer understanding of the parts. Revisiting the text in its entirety and its

parts should enable a deeper understanding of participants' experiences. As an iterative process, each reading or question posed should add to the researcher's understanding.

Immediately following the interviews and without the audio recording, I noted my instinctive reactions and expectations. This step acted as a reminder of my pre-conceptions, provided an opportunity to practise researcher reflexivity, helped me identify areas of potential bias, and 'bracket' them, thus minimising their influence (Chan *et al.* 2013).

Smith *et al.* (2009) suggest repeatedly listening to the audio recordings, after which transcription can begin. I transcribed the interviews by first listening to the audio and transcribing as fully as possible. I then listened to the interview while reading the transcript, pausing to add, remove and alter information where required. The next stage was a repeat of the second, followed by listening to the audio and pausing to add punctuation. Finally, I read the entire transcript along with the audio recording to ensure accuracy. To '…immerse oneself in some of the original data' (Smith *et al.* 2009, p. 82), actively engage with it, and ensure the participant is the focus, I read the full transcripts a further twice, without the audio recordings.

Smith *et al.* advise that exploratory notes will likely fall into three categories – descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual, suggesting that taking notes according to these categories should ensure comprehensive notes. With no set procedures for capturing these notes, exploratory comments can be made on paper or electronically. I chose to place transcripts in a ring-binder, each page overlaid by three transparencies. I was then able to make exploratory comments for each of the three categories on the transcripts without affecting the original transcript. As per the suggested categories, I used one transparency for descriptive comments (events/topics of importance to the participant), another for linguistic notes (pronoun use, cursing, hesitation), and a third for conceptual notes (ideas that could link to theory).

Studying the transparencies individually and in groups, both with and without the original transcript, helped identify each interview's specifics, nuances, and emerging themes.

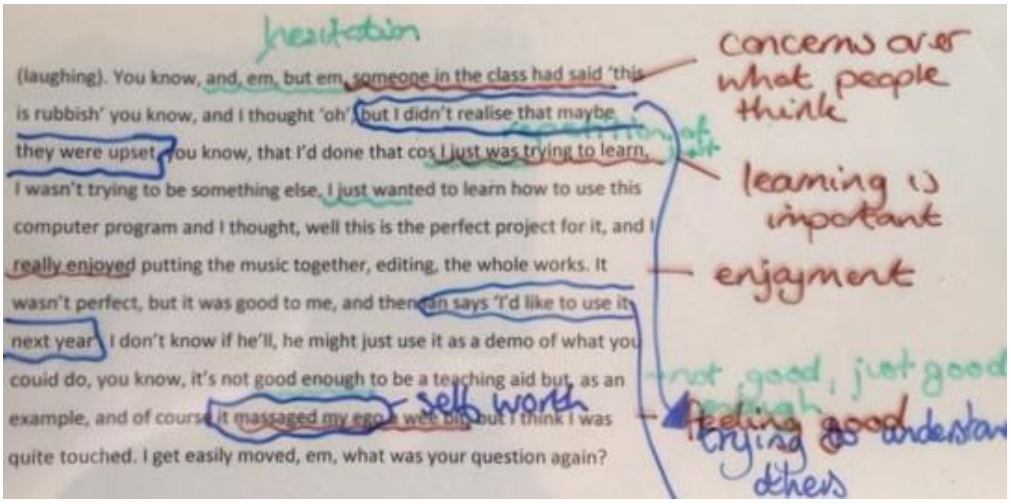


Figure 3 - All Transparencies

I then entered these exploratory comments on the digital transcript in greater detail, ensuring that the notes were easily editable (see Figure 4, right-hand column).

Wanting to be the same as others	although part of me is always kinda seeing things through I went through, em, you know, I always finish things two thirds of the way and then I'll just back off, you know, cos I don't know what that is, there's something in me that just doesn't believe that I can go forward, or there's, I hit a wall, like when you're training and you hit a wall in physical training. And, but just before it I thought about giving up, and I spoke to myself, you know how you do that self talk thing, about how I'd be letting myself down, you know. I would really be letting myself down. And the financial implication of what that would be, because I didn't have a job, I'll be honest with that. And also, em, I felt, em, a loyalty to P as well, you know, I do feel a big loyalty to him, not letting go because of that, because he puts so much into it and he's so dedicated, you know. And my mum, my friend Cathy was going through her cancer treatment, it wasn't cancer that killed her it was a botched bloody operation, and then my mum went into hospital the next day and I thought I was going to lose her as well because she's got OC, OP, OPCD or something like that, it's pulmonary. Her lungs are buggered basically, em, but, eh, yeah it was just determination that, eh, she was in a hospital bed and, eh, I had made, we had been sitting making	I always finish things two thirds - knowing she tends to give up, not wanting to do the same as in the past A desire to change, Proving yourself wrong She knows it is her that is the issue, she backs off herself why, fear of failure? *Hit a wall – more about physical buildings, metaphor*, like when you're – wanting it not to just be her that feels like this, wanting to fit in and be the same as others, sees it as a physical barrier Checking it's not just her, she's not different to other people, letting myself down – she is important herself understanding that she is important *Really be letting myself down – repetition, getting stronger* Finances, no job, college only source of income? Not wanting to hide the practical reasons for staying Loyalty – understanding it's not just about her, caring for others like she cared for the bee Big loyalty – repetition getting stronger, wanting to stay for the sake of others Not wanting to let people down when they've put effort in Appreciation for others' effort *Botched bloody operation – use of bloody, first time she cursed, showing she's upset by it* *Thought she would lose mum as well as friend/sister* *Lungs are buggered – use of buggered, again upset and showing emotion* Whose determination? Hers or her mums? Not clear whether the determination is to do with college or illness but either way she knows it's important *Silly, not silly* – seems silly but maybe not so much if they can have a good effect on someone
I am important I am worth more than this		
It's not just about me Loyalty		
Appreciation		
Determination		
Not doing this just for me		

Figure 4 - Transcript notes

By transforming the exploratory comments into short phrases and single words (see Figure 4, left-hand column), I created 'emergent themes'. I later re-wrote these emergent themes in textboxes which I could rearrange on-screen to identify similar themes. Several themes formed natural groups, while others were less obviously related. Time spent grouping and regrouping themes ensured that the final groups were cohesive, with an identifiable super-ordinate theme. The super-ordinate themes, later transferred to a table with their emergent themes, could be mapped to the text, page, and line numbers that had given rise to their development. This mapping

exercise supported the development of sub-themes, each acting as a bridge between the original text and the super-ordinate themes. Chapter Four provides further detail on the analysis process.

With analysis for the first participant complete, a similar approach could follow for the second. The transcription method and the use of acetates mirrored the first interview; however, I then imported the second transcript into Atlas.ti, a qualitative data analysis software program. Using Atlas.ti helped to identify a systematic way of working through the analysis process. While the software does not make analysis more straightforward, it can make the organisation of transcripts, photographs, journal entries, notes and resulting themes easier to record (Verma 2016). With only two interviews at this point in the study, handwritten notes were already becoming excessive. As I expected the main project to consist of between 10 and 15 interviews and, therefore, to generate substantially more notes than the pilot project, the opportunity to test software with a relatively small volume of data was valuable. Within Atlas.ti, I could enter and code the handwritten notes directly on the transcript using a combination of open coding, In Vivo coding, and coding from the list generated in the first interview to produce a list of emergent themes.

I created a digital version of the first interview's mapping exercise for the second interview, identifying codes' recurrences and locations. Further analysis, such as querying, text crunching, and network views, was possible within Atlas.ti. However, as the intention was to ascertain the usefulness of the software for organisation purposes, trialling these aspects of the software was not necessary. Having mapped the themes for both participants and compiled a list of super-ordinate themes and sub-themes, I was able to identify commonalities and nuances between participants. With only two participants at this stage, achieving agreement between themes was relatively straightforward, with each super-ordinate theme present in both. I was, however, aware that this would be unlikely in the main study.

Lessons Learned

The pilot study proved helpful in highlighting research design flaws and allowing time to reflect on concerns, thus ensuring optimum design for the main study. The pilot study's participant recruitment process worked well; however, only two of the three individuals recruited took part. While three participants would have been helpful for the pilot study, the reduced number did not offer cause for concern. It did, however, highlight a problem associated with conducting interviews late in the academic year. While highlighting several design flaws, the interviews presented an opportunity to consider changes and improve the overall design regarding location, schedule, technique, and journal and photograph elicitation.

Allowing participants to choose an interview location can '…empower… [the participants] in their interaction with the researcher…' (Elwood and Martin 2000, p. 656). As well as offering

potential insight into the participants' worlds through their selection, discussions could vary depending on the place. A student interviewed on campus, for example, may present differently to if interviewed at home, as their role can be location-dependant. Participants in the main study were offered several options but advised that they might select an alternative within the boundaries of practicality for audio recording.

I initially considered it vital that interviews were held towards the end of the academic year, as this would ensure participants had 'persisted'. However, it became apparent that, by doing this, students were less likely to participate. It also put pressure on participants at a crucial point in their studies. By viewing persistence as demonstrable only at the end of the academic year, I was framing the phenomenon of persistence as a singularly occurring, past event. In doing so, I was ignoring persistence as a process through which the participants had worked or may still be working. Bringing interviews forward for the main study acknowledged this point, allowed for more time, and provided more potential for follow-up interviews.

The importance of a well-designed interview schedule became apparent during the pilot study. While the original schedule was sufficient to generate and maintain discussion, it became apparent that the questions did not relate specifically to the phenomenon of persistence. I should have followed up the request for photographs and journal entries before the interview, as, with no reminder to complete these activities, the participant completed neither. An open invitation to bring photographs, videos, or other artefacts may have provided more opportunity for a diverse array of material, potentially improving the ease of initiating discussion. Similarly, the option to complete journal entries through portable means, such as a mobile phone app, may have increased the likelihood of participants completing the task.

Overall, analysis (including initial notes, transcription, commenting and theme development) proved more time-consuming and complicated than I first anticipated. The initial noting, done in an attempt to 'bracket', was a valuable opportunity to assess pre-conceptions of the participants and the phenomenon. In accepting the role of researcher as intrinsically linked to the research, there was no attempt to remove that link through bracketing. Instead, I saw bracketing as an opportunity to practise reflexivity as a researcher, identify potential areas of bias, and examine my position as a researcher (Finlay 2002). Transcription is an integral component of the analysis. While many choose to outsource this to save time, repeated reading and listening forced by the transcription process provides an opportunity to get close to the original data. However, unnecessary delays caused by inadequate equipment during the pilot study resulted in an excessively lengthy transcription process that was quickly rectifiable for the main study.

The combination of methods I employed during the analysis process, from exploratory commenting to generating emerging, sub-, and super-ordinate themes, worked together to determine the most effective and efficient methods for the main study. The transparencies, on which I first made exploratory comments, quickly and easily provided a physical connection to the transcripts. I could then look at comments both in groups and as individual layers, showing the steps I had followed and the order of those steps. However, it quickly became apparent that technology would help with the storage and organisation of the paper/transparency-based comments. I decided against using Atlas.ti for the main study as I did not see the benefit of using qualitative software only for the organisation and handling of data. Furthermore, I was concerned that using it for any analysis would interfere with the interaction between the participants' accounts of their experiences and my interpretations of those experiences.

Feasibility

The pilot study posed questions that could have hindered the main study's success, highlighting the practicalities and theoretical implications of a phenomenological study, and providing valuable indicators of issues to address. Each element of the pilot study helped test some part of the research process, allowing me to fully assess the study's feasibility and ability to answer the research questions. While I would need to alter the methods slightly, the pilot study demonstrated that the proposed methodology and methods could lead to a greater understanding of how students experience persistence, which could inform professional practice in providing support to students considering withdrawal.

3.4 Research Design

Participants

The main study took place across five research sites, each of which was part of a Scottish college. Recruitment and interviewing took place over seven months (November 2017 – May 2018). While it may not always be clear which strategy will attract and retain participants (Patel *et al.* 2003), the strategy design can determine the success of an entire project. However, while researchers agree that recruitment is challenging, relatively little practical advice exists in the literature (McCormick *et al.* 1999; Patrick *et al.* 1998), and research suggests that more analysis of strategies for different groups and on different research sites is needed (Harrington *et al.* in McCormick *et al.* 1999). The FE population's typical lack of involvement in research projects compounds the issue. As a result, professional knowledge and judgement become rich and informative sources for recruitment. My professional background has given me insight into Scottish colleges' inner workings, and I felt well-placed to use my knowledge and the literature to determine an effective strategy. Unfortunately, my lack of confidence and familiarity with the

colleges selected for the project led me to question my strategy and to accept well-meant but ineffective advice.

Ensuring the relevant staff approved of and supported the research project was vital before commencing recruitment. McCormick *et al.* (1999) advocate investing time in this to improve the level of institutional support. Approval and support from the colleges' senior management provided links and contacts with staff who would, in turn, help with the recruitment process.

The research questions restricted eligibility. Where research focuses on a narrow group, as it does in this research project (requiring students in FE who have considered withdrawal), the pool of potential participants is reduced and '…akin to finding a needle in a haystack' (Patrick *et al.* 1998, p. 295). While IPA requires a small number of participants, this research project's focused nature reduced the number of available participants. Trade-offs between methods may always exist, and the selected strategy must consider its efficiency, costs, and practicality. It was necessary, in this project, to combine recruitment strategies. The study's primary recruitment was *via* teaching and support staff, those who knew the students well. However, some participants also provided access to additional participants *via* 'snowballing', and there was recruitment support from social media.

Emami and Mazaheri (2007) propose three categories of reasons for potential participants' reluctance to join or complete research studies: lack of knowledge, sense of insecurity, and cultural view. These categories, apparent in various studies of recruitment strategies, impacted the current study's strategy. Using college staff to recruit students adds a layer that I would avoid if I were recruiting from my workplace; however, their knowledge outweighed this disadvantage. Removing or reducing the 'stranger' element of the study by building trust and rapport with participants *via* already-trusted staff helps break down barriers and ensure participants are comfortable with their decision to share their experiences. Steinke (2004) advises training those who will help with recruitment, to ensure they are confident when relaying details to potential participants. Helping staff understand the study's importance and reassuring potential participants of their safety when participating should, in turn, ensure participants have a good understanding of what is involved and why. Following a meeting with college staff, during which I had described the subject matter and methodology, staff felt confident in the ongoing recruitment and had direct access to me if needed.

The likelihood of participation increases when potential participants understand the purpose (Emami and Mazaheri 2007). Relevant and significant subject matter and the ability to see a future benefit to themselves or others can also increase participation (Patel *et al.* 2003; Steinke 2004). It is essential to spend time with participants, explaining the background of a study and

how their participation could help. Not having direct access to potential participants initially made this problematic, as the information passed through several staff layers before reaching the students. However, in the second round of recruitment, the staff's understanding of the subject and quicker processes ensured the students had a fuller understanding.

It can be difficult to recruit participants for studies that look non-anonymously into socially undesirable behaviours (McCormick *et al.* 1999). While this project might not be considered socially undesirable behaviour, withdrawal from education has negative connotations and could be something students are reluctant to discuss. Concern over the potential negative impact of participation can affect a study (Emami and Mazaheri 2007). Despite plans to anonymise the data, the initial recruitment and interviews meant students were identified by staff, potentially causing some discomfort, and reducing participation. In addition, students may have worries such as being targeted as a 'struggling student' or being asked to leave their course. While incentivising participation through cash or an equivalent can overcome these issues (McCormick *et al.* 1999), I decided not to use incentives as participants may view this as coercion (Steinke 2004).

During the first round of recruitment, college staff announced the study to the entire college. However, as McCormick *et al.* (1999, p. 96) point out, this '"broad brush," school-based approach to recruitment was more likely to identify…[those not relevant to the study]…[as the relevant students]…are more likely to be absent from school, [and] to resist authority figures...'. I was aware that students considering withdrawal may be less likely than their peers to be attending all classes or college meetings, so to recruit in an open forum seemed, and eventually proved, ineffective. I therefore returned to my original strategy and requested that college staff use a targeted approach for recruitment.

While social media supported the strategy, its use was minimal, leading to the recruitment of only one participant. In this instance, the limited success of social media could relate to the age of students regularly viewing social media (Patrick *et al.* 1998). With no control over who can access social media and no assurance that students considering withdrawal had access, I expected it to be insignificant compared to the recruitment carried out by specialised staff with direct access to the required student group.

Recruitment can be an '…emotionally turbulent and maturing experience for a junior researcher' (Patel *et al.* 2003, p. 236), but initial challenges should not prevent us from making follow-up calls and future attempts to recruit. Using various methods, maintaining positivity and objectivity, and seeking advice from more experienced researchers is vital. Following successful initial recruitment but the subsequent loss of those participants, I experienced the turbulence Patel

et al. describe and found it challenging to remain positive. However, following advice from the literature and the supervisory team, a return to my original strategy marked a turning point that would finally secure participants.

In total, 11 participants completed the first interview, which focused on their experiences of education and the occasions they had considered withdrawing from their studies. Interviews, conducted between March and May 2018, ranged from 45 minutes to 1 hour 15 minutes. Two participants completed follow-up interviews at their request. Three participants took part from Site 1, two from Sites 2 and 3, 4 from Site 4, and 1 from Site 5.

In comparison with the overall FE population in Scotland, the sample had a higher proportion of males. Data for 2017/18 (the year interviews took place) suggests that 49% of FE students in Scotland were male, while 64% of the participants were male. The proportion of participants within each age range was higher than sector averages, except age 16 and under:

Scottish FE Sector			
Age range	2017/18 (Interview year)	2019/20 (Most recent available data)	Participants
Under 16	17%	18%	0%
16	7%	7%	0%
17	8%	8%	9%
18-19	12%	11%	27%
20-24	13%	12%	18%
25 and over	43%	44%	45%

Figure 5 - Comparison of participant ages and sector averages

This breakdown may partly reflect the recruitment strategy which aimed for variation across campus, gender, and age. While there was no intention to recruit students with disabilities, several participants disclosed difficulties such as dyslexia, physical disability, and mental health issues. Data published by the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) for students with disabilities suggests that around 14% of FE students in 2017/18 had a disability. With eight participants disclosing a disability, the SFC's figure is vastly different from the 73% of participants with a disability. However, there could be several reasons for this difference. Firstly, published disability statistics rely on disclosure at application. As is the case for many FE students, two participants were diagnosed with a disability during their college studies. Therefore, the actual number of FE students with disabilities is likely to be higher than that suggested by the SFC. Secondly, students with disabilities may also be more inclined to discuss their difficulties with others, particularly as they are encouraged to engage in discussion to ensure reasonable adjustments are in place. They may, therefore, feel more comfortable discussing their experiences and be more inclined to engage in this type of research project. Finally, it may be

that students with disabilities consider withdrawing more readily but are less prone to withdrawing completely. Colleges typically arrange support for students with disabilities, and this may impact their persistence within college.

The following section briefly introduces the participants and outlines their circumstances. All participant names have been altered for anonymity, and their ages and circumstances have been generalised to avoid identification.

Stuart

Stuart is a single male in the age bracket 25 and over, living with family in the local area. He has health difficulties and dyslexia. Stuart had previously completed an introductory level course in the same subject area and regularly received support from the Student Support department.

Graham

Graham is a single father in the age bracket 25 and over, living in the local area. Graham was in his second year of college, having completed an introductory level course. He has dyslexia and regularly receives support from the Student Support department. Graham joined the college following advice from the Job Centre and had worked in construction before beginning his studies.

Sam

Sam was in the age bracket 18-19 at the time of the interview. She had previously worked in administration. Now living locally, she was originally from another area of Scotland, moving to the local area for work before beginning her studies. Sam was single and lived alone but remained close to family and friends from her hometown.

Rebecca

Rebecca is a single female in the age bracket 25 and over, living with her family. She returned to education following a career in the beauty industry. Rebecca was studying her third course in the same subject area, having completed introductory courses. She originally studied in her local area, having moved to another area for her current course. Rebecca has dyslexia and regularly receives support from the Student Support department.

Tristan

Tristan is a single male in the age bracket 18 to 19, living locally with family. He was studying his second course in the same college. Tristan has dyslexia and regularly receives support from the Student Support department.

Taylor

Taylor is a single male in the age bracket 20 to 24 who commutes to college from his family home. He was resitting his course, having been withdrawn the previous year following a family incident.

Katie

Katie is a single female aged 17, living locally with her family. She was studying her second college course, having studied an introductory course previously. She suffered from anxiety and accessed college support regularly.

Alison

In the age bracket 18 to 19, Alison is in a relationship and lives locally with family. She had studied in a different subject area of the same college the previous year. Alison suffered from depression and was a young carer.

Adam

Adam was single and in the age bracket 25 and over, living locally. He had previously completed an introductory level course in the same subject area at another college. He returned to education following a career in professional sport from which he was retired. Adam previously suffered from addiction and was recently diagnosed with dyslexia. However, he did not access college support.

Andrew

Andrew was single and in the age bracket 20 to 24, living locally with family. This was his first college course since leaving school. He had a learning difficulty but did not access the Student Support department.

Chris

Chris was single and in the age bracket 25 and over, commuting daily to college from another area. He had previously withdrawn from another course at a different college. Before returning to education, Chris had worked in the retail and hospitality industry in various parts of the country.

Interviews

Interviews present potential power imbalances, but careful interview planning can protect against this and helps participants feel at ease. DeJonckheere and Vaughn (2019, p. 6) recommend that ‘conveying a sense of being in the interview together and that you as the interviewer are a person

just like the interviewee' can be comforting for interviewees. In line with this recommendation, interviews took place in various locations at the participants' respective college campuses. Interview locations deserve consideration, as they produce '"micro-geographies" of spatial relations and meaning' (Elwood and Martin 2000, p. 649). Elwood and Martin suggest that interview locations can alter identities. They explain that while it may be desirable to allow participants to select a location, complete freedom to choose may prove difficult for some. I selected the college campuses as a general location and gave participants several options within those campuses. I made every attempt to ensure the sites were conducive to informal yet informative dialogue. Conducting interviews at the participants' campuses meant I was the outsider. They were aware of their surroundings and more comfortable in the space than they might have been should they have been asked to venture elsewhere. Staff from the campuses allocated interview rooms which tended to be 'out of earshot' from the participants' teaching and support staff. Three interviews were conducted outdoors, which was mutually consented to on account of rare, good weather.

As with the pilot project, I developed an interview schedule containing open questions about participants' educational experiences and their experiences of persisting in college as follows:

- Could you tell me about your previous experiences of education?
- Could you tell me about how you came to be at college?
- What did you expect college to be like?
- Could you tell me what a typical day at college has been like so far?
- You have identified yourself as someone who has thought about withdrawal but changed your mind. Could you tell me about that?
- Think back to a time when you were thinking about withdrawing. Could you tell me about it?
- Can you tell me about a time when you thought about staying on your course?
- What do you think might have been helpful when you were thinking of leaving your course?
- How do you feel about it all now?
- Is there anything else you would like to tell me about?

I included possible prompts in the interview schedule to remind and help me request follow-up information and probe further if participants struggled to give details or found any of the questions difficult to understand. These prompts included, for example:

- What was happening at the time in college/at home/in your life?
- Can you give me any examples?
- What was on your mind when you were thinking about that?
- How did you feel about that?
- Why do you think you were feeling that way?

Although prompts were unnecessary in most of the interviews as participants were willing and able to talk at length about their experiences, some participants struggled to articulate their experiences fully. The prompts were invaluable during those interviews.

Ethical Considerations

Stirling University's Ethics Committee and the colleges' senior management approved the project. At that point, I shared all ethics documentation (approved ethics form, consent form, withdrawal form) with the colleges before recruitment took place. I spent time with the lead college contacts to ensure they fully understood how participation would work. All participants completed an informed consent form upon agreeing to participate. I included a withdrawal clause in the informed consent form to ensure that any participant who shared information and later decided against having their information published could leave the study. I gave participants the option to read/listen to their interview transcripts to ensure they were comfortable with the transcription accuracy; however, no participant accepted this offer. Upon transcription, I immediately altered participant names and other potential identifiers such as teaching and support staff names, references to locations, and course information. When participants shared personal information during an interview that may have impacted anonymity, I omitted those details from the thesis. For more detail regarding informed consent, see Appendix B.

Interviewing any student about their experiences in education can be emotional. Interviewing those who have considered withdrawal about those experiences, in particular, can be emotional and, at times, distressing (Dickson-Swift *et al.* 2007). Asking participants to remember and recount their difficult experiences requires care and consideration at all times and can present ethical dilemmas for researchers (Davison 2004). During this project, I encountered several 'dilemmas'. At some points, time away to consider options was vital in overcoming these issues.

Participant safety was always a priority. Ensuring participants could share their experiences in a safe environment with fully informed consent was the first ethical concern. When a vulnerable student showed interest in the project, I took time to investigate how likely it was that he would fully understand his role in the project. Upon taking advice from a professional and discussing

my concerns with his support worker, I withdrew him from the study. I explained to the student that while he may speak with me about his experiences, I would not record or use his information for the project. This was a valuable lesson from which I took staff understanding as a priority I must address.

I ensured I dealt with the nature of the participants' experiences sensitively. While all participants shared upsetting and emotional experiences with me, one shared an experience I felt was too sensitive to include in the written project. I referred to his experience as a 'personal trauma' to maintain the severity of his experience while retaining his anonymity and security. Although the participant permitted me to disclose details of his experience, I felt it was unfair to publicise his trauma. Although some may question whether I have, in this instance, 'edited' the participant's voice, I believe readers can hear his voice regardless of the undisclosed trauma details.

On several occasions, I felt caught between being a teacher and being a researcher. I had not disclosed my profession to the participants, but my natural reaction to students with difficulties is to provide support. Upon hearing some experiences, particularly those relating to my field of expertise (supporting students with learning difficulties), I had to make difficult decisions regarding what support I could offer. While my immediate reaction was to provide support for their experiences, I had to refrain. While not there to support the participants, I found the interview process was supportive in its own right. Several participants became tearful throughout the interviews, but each of them recovered and was grateful for the opportunity to be heard. Although not designed to be a guidance or support session, the act of providing a safe space in which to talk about distressing experiences was, for some, something they had not experienced.

I used a journal to work through difficult decisions and discussed some of the more complex issues with the supervisory team. The reflective journal gave me a space to make notes, remind myself of the emotions and feelings I had attached to the interviews, and 'argue' with myself regarding my decisions. The final section of this chapter outlines the need for a reflective journal in IPA research, while Appendix C provides some insight into my journal entries.

3.5 Reflexivity

IPA theory often discusses the concept of 'bracketing'. Pure phenomenology and its aim to get back to 'the things themselves' is challenging. While Husserl argues that phenomenological research must find the true meaning of the participants' experiences and avoid any disruption from the researcher's mind, I do not believe this to be possible. Instead, I moved to Heidegger's position, believing I must 'bracket' my forethoughts and attempt to disallow them from interrupting my research. However, this quickly became another impossibility and a task that

seemingly fought against the research activity's idea. I have personal experience of the subject, and the interpretation involved in IPA is my (and the participants') interpretation. As such, I focused on being true to my experiences and highlighted them in my reflective journal, not to make them significant to the study but to aid transparency. I did not originally intend to provide excerpts of my reflective journal within the thesis; however, I found I relied upon my journal entries to clarify my thoughts and remind myself of critical decisions throughout the analysis process. As such, I have included a selection of journal entries in Appendix C and, where necessary, have indicated how they helped in my analysis.

3.6 Chapter Summary

This chapter has described the research methodology adopted in the study. It has outlined my reasons for selecting a phenomenological approach and my use of IPA in particular. It details the steps taken in conducting a pilot project and how the pilot impacted the main study. The chapter explains the decisions I reached for carrying out the research, from recruitment to interview. Chapter Four demonstrates the steps taken in analysing the data following the interviews.

Chapter Four:
Data Analysis

Chapter Four: Data Analysis

Introduction

This chapter details how I analysed the data in the main project. It describes the transcription method and the interpretation stages I followed for each participant.

4.1 Interview Transcription

I transcribed each interview as soon after the interview as practicable, using my research diary, memory, and the recordings themselves to accurately reflect the interviews. As is usually the case in IPA, I carried out all transcription myself, instead of recruiting a professional transcription service. This process helped ensure I was fully immersed in the data, reliving the interviews through the participants' voices. The transcription process was conducted in stages as follows:

1. Transcribing the conversations, only pausing the recordings to type.

2. Listening and amending conversations that had been misheard or mistyped in the original transcription.

3. Listening and amending conversations to insert punctuation, including pauses and emphases.

4. Listening and amending errors.

Inserting punctuation was challenging, as it is often unclear when listening to audio if an individual is beginning a new sentence. As a result, much of the punctuation within the transcripts denotes pauses and emphasis rather than grammar. I identified and noted pauses within the text using a series of dots, i.e., three dots (…) indicate a short pause, while six dots (… …) indicate a long pause in which the participant took time to consider their response.

I italicised words that the participants emphasised; however, it became clear that their emphasis may have been due to dialect, so I did not use this emphasis during the interpretation stages. Parts of audio that I could not hear fully were marked [inaudible]. To maintain confidentiality, I altered participants' names and names of those about whom they talked, generalised their course names using the SFC's subject areas, and removed or altered stories that had the potential to identify participants or other individuals. One participant spoke about an experience that he requested be kept confidential. While he was happy to continue recording, I did not transcribe or analyse that section of audio.

I stored a spreadsheet containing all participants' names and pseudonyms in a secure file, alongside the password-protected transcripts.

I began adding comments to the transcripts during transcription, as soon as I noticed statements that I considered significant. I then maintained those comments on all future versions of the transcripts. Automatic timestamping on the comments meant I could see when I had made those comments compared with when I had carried out all other analysis on the transcript. I formatted the transcripts using two layouts. I used the first layout, consisting of double-line spacing and a wide right-hand margin, with transparencies to make handwritten notes during the initial analysis stage. The second layout followed the guidance provided by Smith *et al.* (2009) and consisted of a three-column table with the transcript in the centre, comments on the right, and emergent themes on the left (as seen previously, in Figure 4, page 75).

4.2 Exploratory Commenting

Using the paper-based transcripts, followed by the electronic transcripts, I commented upon each narrative in turn. This stage required several readings of the transcripts, and upon each reading, I made further comments. For example, with the first transcripts, I commented on description, linguistics, and concepts separately; however, this gradually became a single step as I became more familiar with the idea of exploring the narratives and gained confidence in my ability to make comprehensive comments.

Descriptive Comments

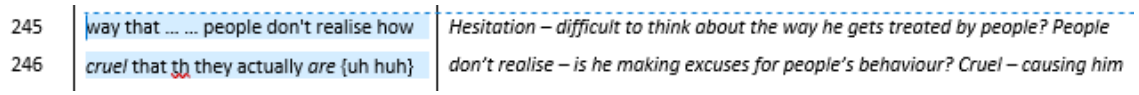
Descriptive commenting involved taking the transcripts at 'face-value', noting what the participants described, paying attention to those events, experiences, feelings, and people that seemed essential to them. This stage ensured I understood what the participants had discussed, and brought the experiences that were noteworthy to them to the fore. Although less interpretative than the linguistic and conceptual commenting, it still required me to think about and interpret their narratives to determine what, in my view, was significant to them. An example of notes made during this stage can be seen in Stuart's transcript, below (descriptive comments highlighted in blue):

25	{right} And, trying to tell that to	Describing the struggle to be heard.
26	teachers is like talking to a brick wall	*Metaphor – they're not listening.*
27	[laughing] … Or trying to tell anyone	*Laughing off the frustration.* Reiterating t
28	that is trying to talk to a brick wall and	*the struggle to be heard.*

Figure 6 - Descriptive commenting

Linguistic Comments

Linguistic commenting focussed on the participants' use of language and how they presented their experiences. Comments included parts of their speech such as pauses and hesitation. For an example of this type of commenting, see below, where my linguistic comments on Adam's transcript are italicised:



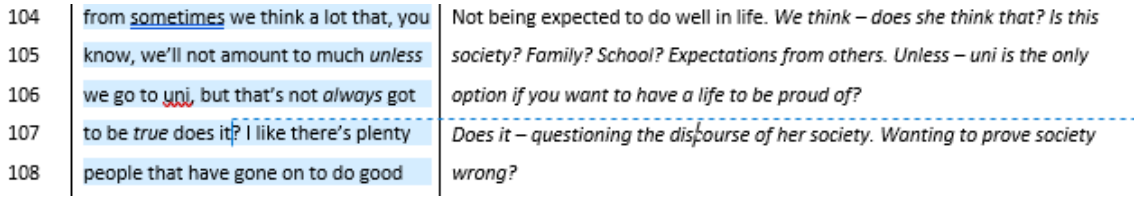
245	way that … … people don't realise how	*Hesitation – difficult to think about the way he gets treated by people? People*
246	*cruel* that th they actually *are* {uh huh}	*don't realise – is he making excuses for people's behaviour? Cruel – causing him*

Figure 7 - Linguistic commenting

I made several comments relating to pronoun use. Participants alternated from using first person to third person when describing experiences. Their changing pronoun use may have indicated uncertainty over whether their experiences were unique to them. At other times, participants used pronouns such as 'she' or 'he' instead of providing names. I often commented about my lack of clarity regarding whether they used those pronouns to remain loyal to friends, family, or staff by not naming them, or because they felt those people did not deserve to be named. I also highlighted metaphors during this stage, and some of those metaphors later helped in theme development.

Conceptual Comments

The final stage of commenting, albeit the process was not linear, was conceptual commenting. This involved taking a more interpretative stance, attempting to step back from participants' explicit claims and interpreting those claims using my professional and personal understanding of the subject, combined with what I had learned from the participants' narratives. Engaging with the transcripts at this level served multiple purposes; it ensured the interpretative element required of IPA, and it questioned both the participants' meanings and my interpretations. Conceptual comments arising from this stage included the following, from Sam's transcript (italicised):



104	from sometimes we think a lot that, you	Not being expected to do well in life. *We think – does she think that? Is this*
105	know, we'll not amount to much *unless*	*society? Family? School? Expectations from others. Unless – uni is the only*
106	we go to uni, but that's not *always* got	*option if you want to have a life to be proud of?*
107	to be *true* does it? I like there's plenty	*Does it – questioning the discourse of her society. Wanting to prove society*
108	people that have gone on to do good	*wrong?*

Figure 8 - Conceptual commenting

While the level of interpretation increases during this stage and begins to lead us away from the participants' own words, it is essential to ensure the comments remain linked to and embedded

in their experiences. The double hermeneutic becomes increasingly apparent at this stage as I interpret the participants' interpretations of their experiences.

4.3 Developing Themes

Having compiled extensive notes on the transcripts, I began analysing my comments to develop themes emerging from the data and my comments. While attempting to maintain the complexity of the participants' experiences, I searched for phrases that could encapsulate what those experiences meant to the participants. In doing so, I periodically hid the column containing the transcript, leaving only my comments in view. Hiding the transcript column allowed me to focus on my interpretations and helped me develop emergent themes that were becoming increasingly interpretative while remaining grounded in the narratives. Smith *et al.* (2009, p. 92) suggest '…emergent themes should feel like they have captured and reflect an understanding' of the participants' experiences. The phrases and words should outline the participants' various experiences, and this then helps develop and link the emergent, sub-, and super-ordinate themes during the subsequent stages of analysis.

The following emergent theme of 'struggling to forget', taken from Rebecca's transcript, shows how her initial statement in which she describes memories of school bullies encouraged me to think about the long-term effects of bullying on her more recent experience of considering withdrawal:

Struggling to forget	158	just, it *never* goes away from you, it's	*Never goes away – struggling to forget the past, always – repeated, in the back*
	159	always *always* in the back of your head,	*of your head – niggling in your mind, knowing it's not important but not being*
	160	em not having self like self-*confidence*	*able to help it being there*

Figure 9 - Emergent Themes

Developing Sub-themes

With a list of emergent themes generated for a participant, I began grouping and arranging the phrases to create clusters of themes. I used several methods to look for connections between themes, both on paper and electronically. During the earlier stages, I found this task was easier using paper. The physical act of moving themes around allowed me to explore various groupings and required several changes before creating groups that I felt demonstrated a real sense of my interpretations of the participants' data. With later data sets, I was able to carry out this task more quickly electronically; however, the system I used remained largely unchanged. Grouping similar themes on an Excel spreadsheet, I was able to rearrange themes quickly and easily. Although lengthy, this process was vital in helping me determine what was critical to the participant and what their experiences meant to them.

Developing Super-ordinate Themes

With the clustered groups of sub-themes, I was able to explore super-ordinate themes for the participants. The following table demonstrates the groups of sub-themes for one participant, Stuart, as they were at this stage. I developed the super-ordinate theme, 'Control and decision making', for Stuart based on the combination of sub-themes shown in bold: 'conceding control', 'desire for control', and 'taking control', along with the emergent themes which had led to them (listed below):

Control & decision making	**conceding control**	**a desire for control**	**taking control**
	not ready to take control	over tasks	power over staff
	lack of control	over others	showing tutors up
	no need for control	needing guidance for control	pushing power boundaries
	accepting instruction	over own learning	questioning staff
	accepting tasks	needing help to decide	disrespecting staff
	over self		
	over the future		
	not his decisions		
	whose descisions are they		
	who knows best		
	doing as told/expected		

Figure 10 - Developing Super-ordinate Themes

In later iterations of this theme, the following table helped me to keep track of the statements Stuart had made that gave rise to the theme:

The psychology of control - figuring out who's in control	**Line**	**key words**
I'm staying at college for others	913/4	even though she's not here I'll try
It's not my decision	95	they..put me on
I have a lack of control	231	don't give up
I have no control over the future		
I'm not ready to take control	684	choose what the rules are for us
I need guidance to take control	721	someone to help me here
I want over my own learning	198	I'll sit and do that
I need help to decide		
I have no control over myself	1557/8	I ended up
I'm not sure who knows best	381	I'm telling you I will
I want control over tasks	453/4	allowed to ...but it has to be
I don't know whose descisions they are	257	my gran wouldn't expect
I have no need for control		

Figure 11 - Theme statements

This stage of analysis took time, and I made various changes at each stage. Stuart's transcript was one of the first transcripts I analysed, and theme development involved numerous changes as I became increasingly familiar with the data and the IPA process. As an interpretative process

with no set 'method' for analysing data, I combined the steps suggested by Smith *et al.* (2009) while maintaining my preferred organisation and interpretation methods.

4.4 Cross-case Patterns

Having analysed each transcript in detail and with sub- and super-ordinate themes for each participant, I began examining cases together. Several themes were immediately recognisable as similar across all cases: 'control', for example. However, some themes were evident in some cases but not in others. Identity, represented in all cases, was expressed in various ways, each with different sub-themes. While developing a super-ordinate theme for identity may have appeared relatively straightforward initially, comparing and contrasting the sub-themes and individual experiences meant there was no one apparent super-ordinate theme. There were obvious connections and similarities, but evidence of my thoughts was vital as I did not want any individual participant's experiences to subsume those of another participant. As such, I made notes on each transcript whenever I noticed a similarity or recalled another participant's description.

An indication of the themes relevant to each participant is detailed below:

Theme	Adam	Alison	Andrew	Chris	Graham	Katie	Rebecca	Sam	Stuart	Taylor	Tristan
'I'm not what I thought I was': a disrupted sense of self											
The 'real' me?		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Transformations	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	
Fitting in while standing out	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
'Just getting on with it': the push and pull of motivation											
Precarious motivation	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
The social embeddedness of motivation	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
The persistence challenge	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
'Did I just decide myself?' The ambiguity of agency											
An uncertain sense of agency	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Attributing blame	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Achieving agency	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
'What am I doing here?' Emotions and coping while considering withdrawal											
Lost and confused	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Mattering	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Dealing with emotions	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Figure 12 - Prevalence for each participant for super-ordinate and sub-themes

4.5 Chapter Summary

Chapter Four has provided a detailed description of my analysis process. Transcribing each interview and developing themes was time-consuming and complex, but a systematic approach and time spent immersed in the data proved invaluable. I now detail the outcomes of this data analysis in the following chapter, which shares the participants' experiences and reveals the sub- and super-ordinate themes I developed from those experiences.

Chapter Five:
Findings

Chapter Five: Findings

Introduction

This chapter presents the fieldwork and analysis findings in terms of the four super-ordinate themes and their sub-themes. The themes developed were as follows:

- 'I'm not what I thought I was': a disrupted sense of self
    - The 'real' me?
    - Transformations
    - Fitting in while standing out
- 'Just getting on with it': the push and pull of motivation
    - Precarious motivation
    - The social embeddedness of motivation
    - The persistence challenge
- 'Did I just decide myself?': the ambiguity of agency
    - An uncertain sense of agency
    - Attributing blame
    - Achieving agency
- 'What am I doing here?': emotions and coping while considering withdrawal
    - Lost and confused
    - Mattering
    - Dealing with emotions

The following sections outline and detail each theme, providing evidence through verbatim quotes of the participants. The participants, outlined in Chapter Three, comprised 11 students (seven male and four female) ranging from ages 17 to 53, studying various FE level courses at five Scottish College campuses. Chapter Four (Figure 12) details each participant's inclusion in each of the themes. At the end of each sub-theme, a table highlights any participants not directly quoted but for whom the theme is relevant.

5.1 'I'm not what I thought I was': a disrupted sense of self

Introduction

Participants described their search for a sense of self, conveying the difficulty they experienced in knowing who they are as individuals and in relation to others. This section demonstrates the conflict they felt between understanding themselves and how others may have understood them.

It shows how their perceived identities were malleable, ever-changing, and impacted by their relationships with others.

The 'real' me?

Participants drifted between positive and negative appraisals of their character and ability, demonstrating glimpses of pride among apologetic expressions. Some looked to others to define them, while others attempted to define themselves. Participants considered and built their sense of self according to their knowledge of themselves and their perceptions of how others understood them. They shifted between questioning and wondering, stating 'facts' and apologising for whom they believed themselves to be. There was a noticeable uncertainty of who they are and how this uncertainty affected their persistence in almost every case. Their quest to find the 'real' them was not always apparent, but for some, it hid in plain sight among their tentative statements of who they are. Sam, in particular, spent time considering and questioning her true self:

> *there's no need for anyone to be stuck unless like you you're, maybe if you've got like a learning like dyslexia or something maybe. But I don't have any of that, I just…I think I'm just lazy, or may like maybe not lazy I'm just too shy, check me out yapping on and on and then saying I'm shy eh? It's good though to just to have someone to tell it all to cos like my, I'm sure my mates get fed up of me and my "problems" [gesturing inverted commas] like I've not got "real" problems [gesturing again] only the you know problems I've made for myself and half of those are only cos I'm a bit lazy and I can't be bothered going to class. Oh god I hope my mum my mum would kill me if she ever I hope she doesn't read this she'd go mental about me being lazy [laughing]. But then…I don't know if it really is cos I'm lazy or is it just that I've not been happy…like…I've not been really really miserable like, I've not been upset and crying in class or anything, I'm just I don't know I just I get annoyed cos yeah (Sam)*

Missing the first day of her course and many other subsequent college days, Sam had struggled to make friends on her course. While ready to accept responsibility for missed classes and label herself as lazy, she quickly asserts this may not be the real her. Fleetingly suggesting her lack of attendance and friendships was shyness-related, Sam quickly asserts that shyness is not her difficulty. A few moments later, she settles on feelings of unhappiness as more accurately reflective of her problems. Attempting to uncover the real Sam confuses her. Her description of herself reveals a lack of clarity, which reduces as she thinks and talks about herself during the interview. Although aware of some aspects of her nature, Sam slowly realises that what she, and others, see on the surface is not necessarily a true reflection of herself. It seems that Sam's persistence has given her time to reflect on her time at college and has shown her parts of her character that she may not otherwise have understood.

To form their sense of self, participants relied on others and themselves; others' assessments of them helped them believe the positives that they might otherwise have struggled to believe. Taylor, one of the youngest participants who had recently experienced significant trauma, seemed self-assured and resilient, but he was unhappy in college and wanted to leave. His mother's assessment of him helped him believe and embrace his inner strength:

> *that was one of the reasons that I I wanted to leave college and, I think after that my mum was like 'you're strong, and you've been through so much so, I think…you just do what you want to do and…show everyone different' (Taylor)*

Otherwise unsure of his ability to persist in college, Taylor accepts his mother's praise, as though he has needed this confirmation before being able to define himself in this way, despite his confident persona. This positive reinforcement of his strength of character served to bolster Taylor's self-worth, as it confirmed what he already partly believed. Starkly contrasting with Taylor's positive parental influence, Chris's mother expected him to withdraw. Having withdrawn from a previous course and with frequent employment moves, Chris was already unsure of his ability to persist, and his mother's assessment of him served to confirm his own belief:

> *I think she knew…that was going to happen…sort of in the back of her mind I th I think she knew I was going to…either back out or drop out if that makes sense. Back out before I started or drop out within a few weeks [upset] em…{What makes you think that?} Because of my previous track record…it's, my previous track record when it comes to, em, when it comes to work, when it comes to studying, is I feel as though she knew that was going to happen and she's because it it seems to be this is only sort of over ten years of work, only seems to be the only thing that I know is minimum wage jobs. It's because it's easy. You turn up, do what you need to do and you go back home again (Chris)*

Chris's reputation for withdrawal was overtaking his ambition. Despite wanting to move on and study, he was nervous, debilitated by a past that he believed he could not overcome. He questioned his future and assumed he was incapable of change. His mother's view of him corroborated his belief that his ability was fixed and unchanging. When told by his mother that he could not see things through, he accepted this as accurate, no longer feeling he could change. While some might see this as an opportunity to prove others wrong, Chris believed and accepted it as though it would be true forever. Both Taylor and Chris have readily accepted their parents' appraisals of them, as though their parents know them better than they know themselves. However, both accepted views that verified their existing sense of self; it seems that to accept others' opinions when they match our own is likely to be easier than to accept alternative viewpoints.

Accepting parents' views might be understandably straightforward, as they have watched us grow and become whom we present to the world. However, other people's views can be difficult to accept. During Andrew's schooldays, he found himself '*liked*', but this was a difficult concept to accept:

> *it was, kinda hit and miss at times, I mean, at the start I did get bullied as well but, I did actually end up befriending said bully… {oh right} Exactly how, I'm not entirely sure [laughing], but I also in that school ended up befriending…near enough everyone in said school including a good amount of the teachers so…{ok} Yeah, apparently I was someone who was liked, that were just weird enough to…get entertainment from (Andrew)*

Andrew quickly transforms his admission that people like him into a negative statement about himself. Rather than accepting the positive appraisal, he seems unsure and struggles to accept it as accurate. As though confused by his likeability, Andrew demonstrates uncertainty, settling on his 'weirdness' as the only possible reason. Rather than seeing himself as likeable, he assumes his difference provides his likeability, showing doubt that others should regard his personality positively.

All participants shared areas of their character that they firmly accepted as the 'real' them. Whether positive or negative, they tended to link to the past, as though their character formed before college, and they could not envisage it changing. While they typically saw their established characteristics as positive, many found them significant in their difficulties at college. Tristan, for example, was clear about his perceived independence. Struggling to ask for help at college, he was unable to explain why he finds this challenging:

> *I wouldn't speak to a a lecturer…{why not?} I feel like it's just a waste of time, it's just…classroom…stuff…like it's just student stuff and th they've got better things to do like teach us…not to deal with my problems…{Ok, and you wouldn't go and see somebody like Jane?} Oh no no no…I wouldn't do that…{why not?} Just I mean she well she helps a lot of folk out I know that but I mean, I just…it's my problem really…I I'd rather sort it out, I've be I've always been like that, I know I cos I can't I'm one of these people that can't ask for help very well…{uh huh} I know that but I I mean it's my problem, I'll sort it or I'll try and sort it anyway (Tristan)*

While Tristan seems, at first, to be satisfied with his desire to *'sort it out'* himself, he then appears to reconsider this. Turning a positive into a negative, asserting it as a character deficiency, he begins to doubt the sense in his approach to life. Although Tristan does not explain why he has difficulty asking for support, he suggests it is part of his nature. He sees himself as unable to change and accepts this flaw. Tristan has come to accept it as a natural and normal part of his character, but it has begun to cause difficulty at college as he struggles to accept support. Having struggled at school and having felt he was worth less than his peers, it seems Tristan has

succumbed to the idea that he is not worthy of support. Sensing he is less able than many others, as he believed he was in school, Tristan admits defeat and attempts to support himself. Tristan's early experiences have been so impactful that they have defined him, regardless of his current capabilities. Tristan is so accustomed to difficulty and lack of understanding that he now equates inability with who he is.

In contrast to the academic challenges Tristan faced, Chris's feelings of inability were more generalised. Describing the first day of his current course, when he had first considered withdrawing, Chris spoke of himself as unable to complete a course. Like Tristan, Chris's negative self-perception had become so ingrained in his mind that the decision to be unable to complete was natural. In the statement below, Chris projects inability on himself:

> *probably about a month before, couple of weeks before we were about to start, it was the, getting real excited I'm actually going back to college I'm actually going to attain something and k it it was the first induction day, the induction day was fine an I r I was knew I was going to be the eldest person there, em, but it came to the actual first day of college and going in into the classroom I h a tremendous…overwh...strongest feeling of anxiety I've ever had…in my life really if that makes sense…{uh huh} And… I did the same thing when it came to the college course eh the college eh eh interview with [college name removed for confidentiality]. I decided that I was I I can't do it…So, I went back to the car, sat in the car, and I says 'Christopher, what did you do that for?' (Chris)*

Chris expressed his lack of ability as a decision he made, suggesting he is aware of his potential to hold himself back. Basing his decision on how he had acted in the past, Chris has decided to identify as someone who does not complete courses, potentially a defining moment in his life. However, making such a decision on who he is and what he can or cannot do seems to defy his sense of self in some way; identifying as someone with little control over his completion was a decision over which he had ultimate control. It seems that making decisions to achieve adverse outcomes may be more straightforward than making decisions to achieve positive outcomes, as they avoid any potential for future criticism or disappointment.

By accepting their 'flawed' character and basing expectations on those flaws, outcomes become inherently based on 'nature'. Several participants accepted 'blame' for their difficulties at college, but they simultaneously linked that blame to their inherent and unchangeable nature. It seems that while we can accept our part in the challenges we face, we may never feel entirely at fault. I will return to and consider blame in greater detail in a later theme. Academic persistence is challenging and could be made more straightforward or complex depending on our character. Tristan's view of himself is not merely one of someone with learning difficulties; he sees himself as flawed. Perceived competition with siblings and other family members left him believing his

abilities are less than others'. Like faulty, worthless equipment, he sees his dyslexia as reducing him to a worthless sense of self. This 'fault' that Tristan perceived directly impacted his ability, and while he seems to accept that he could not control it, he felt the need to apologise for it:

> *there's just some big competition like who's who's got the better kids…so, me having dyslexia that that's a that's a fault really*
>
> and
>
> *they said 'oh oh why can't you write them that?' And I'm like 'oh, sorry, I just can't read can I?' It it's not my fault, really… I can't help it (Tristan)*

Tristan's apologies suggest he is unsure whether his difficulties are his fault, but he is clear that he cannot change them. Instead, he has resigned himself to a lack of ability and sees it as defining him. Rather than challenging others' behaviours and views, Tristan accepts his sense of self as a non-reader and apologises for what he accepts as 'him'. Tristan is not alone in apologising for whom he believes he is; Stuart demonstrates a similar sense of regret. While Tristan appears to accept his unchangeable nature, however, Stuart seems unhappy that he sees no way of changing:

> *I'm like 'I can only be one person [tearful] I can only try my best'. I'm trying to understand words that I don't even know, in the first place, I don't even know big words at all, and I'm getting told I have to learn these words, this word, this word, this word, just to get the same level and I was like 'that's never going to happen' (Stuart)*

Stuart appears to wish he could be someone else, perhaps someone with fewer difficulties. However, accepting a sense of self that he sees as out of his control, he demonstrates how he is unsure of himself and his actions. Describing himself as *'one person'* demonstrates Stuart's dissatisfaction with himself and his abilities and a realisation that his best may not be good enough to succeed in college.

The tussle between accepting others' opinions of us and forging our sense of self is complex. A sense of self does not form overnight; years of experiences and interactions with others impact it. While accepting others' opinions may seem simple at times, it appears it is made simpler by an underlying sense of self that agrees with and complements what others believe. For students facing challenges, whether personal or academic, it is difficult to remain positive. Instead, their minds transport them back to previous difficult experiences, and the sense of self that originally formed during those challenging times becomes the easiest 'real' them to accept.

Participant	Extract	Page; line number
Alison	obviously I'm a carer	2; 27
Katie	I'm just glad I wasn't one of them	24; 518
Rebecca	I'm the type of person to be, I'm probably	21; 454
		n = 9

Figure 13 - Theme occurrences: The 'real' me?

Transformations

The extracts above demonstrate the challenge of understanding and accepting what is 'known' about oneself and how impactful others' perceptions can be. While what they accepted or understood as the 'real' them seemed at times to be fixed and unchanging, it became clear this was not always the case.

Throughout the interviews, it became apparent how each participant had an earlier 'version' of themselves. Struggling to let go of this earlier version, as they began to face and embrace their new sense of self, they continued to battle with the old 'them'. For some, their old sense of self was critical to their new sense of self. In contrast, others' established sense of self threatened their emerging sense of self. The following section shows how the participants' persistence altered their sense of self as they began to forge a new sense of self and let go of the past. What follows focuses on the stories of four participants' pasts to illustrate their experiences and how they had impacted their persistence. It demonstrates a sense of achievement in reaching goals they had previously considered unattainable, and the positive and negative impacts their experiences had on their sense of self.

For many, those stories related to schooldays and earlier college experiences. Chris's previous experience of withdrawing from college and jobs led to him having felt trapped in a vicious cycle in which he had become known as someone unlikely ever to succeed:

> *I do feel as though when I first started the course…I felt, I felt weak, if that makes sense. I feel as though you you your, sort of my track record in previous times when it comes to jobs, em, what's the point in starting? Because you going to, you're going to give up on it anyway. But, this this seems to be the only thing, that I've managed to follow through. I don't know why (Chris)*

Remembering his earlier withdrawal and how he believed others saw him, Chris had begun to feel worthless. He felt trapped by his past and was sure he was unable to change. Believing his past experiences defined him, facing an alternative future of success was daunting. However, while his worries threatened to hold him back, it seems some part of him believed he had yet to find the 'real' Chris. Determined to make his future more successful than his past, he was fearful of his potentially uncertain future but similarly fearful of allowing his past to influence decisions

that would shape that future. Not wanting to regret decisions or look back at a life full of missed opportunities helped shape his determination and drive him forward. Chris saw a chance to embrace a new sense of self, carry on studying, and face potentially limited work opportunities in future, or he could revert to his old sense of self, find secure work, and face a future of regret and self-criticism. Chris's concerns suggest these decisions can be challenging, and it appears students need space to consider whether they are ready and willing to change. Still, the change Chris saw in himself later in the academic year was in stark contrast to his earlier descriptions:

> *I feel so much better about, not because I'm the go to guy, it's it's a sort of reassurance for me that...I'm not what I thought I was, if that makes sense, that's actually made me quite emotional thinking about that [laughing] {yeah} I'm not...as much of a failure, if that makes sense. And I think that's what it was that's what makes me get up in the mornings to come here is, I don't feel…as useless*
>
> and
>
> *it's a sort of, sort of let your mind run free, and see how far it's going to take you, which I really do enjoy with the course is when it cos it's when it's, all these creative ideas. What I've done in the past, where I've just took it took taken a note in my phone, and it never went any further than that, and I've thought nobody's going to see it and that's fine. But when it comes to this course it sort of the, the creative side of me's coming out (Chris)*

Chris's sense of self changed drastically. Having felt worthless and *'weak'*, he had struggled to see the part he played in society, but his persistence at college helped illuminate his worth. No longer fixating on the negative aspects of his life or his *'failure[s]'*, he was able to see himself in a new light. While Chris demonstrates a more positive self-perception, he still retains elements of his previous self-assessment. He no longer views himself as *'as much of a failure'* or *'as useless'*, hinting that he still holds on to some negativity. Chris's old life had blocked his creativity, a side of himself he had ignored. His course, however, has not just allowed his imagination; it has required it. Beginning to embrace this, we see Chris beginning to reinvent himself as the person he has perhaps always wanted to be but whom he has previously ignored. While Chris's previous version of himself focused on what he believed others needed or wanted, his newfound understanding of himself favours his own needs and desires. It seems college experiences and the act of persisting help re-shape and redefine us. They provide opportunities to try new activities, see how new 'others' see us, and reconsider the truth in our sense of self.

Like Chris, Alison struggled with the sense of self she had formed during difficult times. She had accepted her future as one of negativity, as others had told her she was unable to succeed:

> *when I was in high school I always got telt 'oh you'll never go to college, you'll never get a job', ken? 'you'll never dae anything with your life, you're going to be on the dole', ken? Stuff like that, from teachers and the head teacher of my High School. And like, it was always 'oh you're never going to dae anything with your life', all this and that and it was like 'alright then'. And then I started believing it (Alison)*

Alison had become so used to hearing statements such as *'you'll never get a job'*, she had resigned herself to accepting this as fact. Unfortunately, this 'fact' had overridden any sense of potential she had and was beginning to determine her entire future. Alison shares that school staff, her teachers and headteacher, had made these statements. She adds this as an afterthought, as though she considers that while we may have assumed that this was who had made these character judgements, it was important that she made it clear to us. We sense from this that she is reminding us of hierarchies within schools and that it is clear why as a schoolchild, she would believe what her senior 'others' tell her. While Alison had initially believed these statements, however, and brought those beliefs to her college studies, she uses the past tense, suggesting her beliefs have begun to change.

Alison used her strengths and experience as a carer during her first college course, relying on the one area of her life in which she believed she was competent. Having completed that course successfully, Alison had begun to overcome the negative self-perception based on her schooldays. Like Chris, however, she later chose to alter her path and changed course to study a subject in which she had a personal interest rather than experience. Taking the positive step to study a different subject was difficult, but it offered opportunities for Alison to focus on herself instead of others. However, this was not without challenges, and Alison often fought against her thoughts of withdrawal. Following personal difficulties, she took time off and considered withdrawing, hampered by a sense of self that was negative. However, supported by friends and staff, Alison returned to college, despite often finding it difficult and upsetting. Never having struggled with academic work, Alison's reduced confidence in her ability and a need to take time off had begun to impede her ability. She began to believe she could no longer achieve success on her course. Losing faith in her ability, Alison needed to achieve success to believe in her ability once more. In doubting herself, she had begun to adopt a new sense of self as 'someone who cannot', despite no evidence of this. She needed the encouragement of passing assessments to renew her self-confidence and regain her positive sense of self:

> *I think it's when I started passing like assessments and that, I was like 'no I can dae this' ken like, put me back on a positive route, like, fair enough I've missed a few weeks but, ken I can still dae it (Alison)*

Alison's positive sense of self had begun to deteriorate as she worried that she would not pass her course. However, she had no failure on which to base this worry. Alison's difficult times at college reminded her of her difficult schooldays, and her self-belief gave way to the sense of self she had developed at school. Her return to 'normality', where she proved to herself and others that she was capable, marked a turning point for Alison. While briefly relapsing into a negative sense of self, positive outcomes helped her refocus and reconsider her ability. Although it might be possible to overcome our previous sense of self, Alison shows that we may never let it go entirely.

Graham's schooldays had been similarly impactful. His attendance at a *'special'* school immediately labelled him as *'different'*, which led him to feel different throughout his entire life, particularly as he still struggles to manage his learning difficulties. Now part of mainstream classes and no longer segregated at college, Graham appears to find the lack of segregation difficult. His unpleasant school memories return, and we sense he vividly remembers how it felt to be *'different'*. Unable to shake off these memories, it seems Graham's lasting sense of self is one of difference and inability:

> *Eh…oh…eh fff……just eh...pff it's it's very hard to talk about if I'm quite honest eh? {yeah} Oh aye eh {You don't have to talk about anything you don't want to} No, I it's just trying to find it and put it into words… {Yeah…} Eh eh what was it like eh it was like eh…the school like eh people were…always eh…taking fun of you cos you couldn't read and write eh, teachers didn't know what what dyslexic was at that time kind of thing eh, getting called dunce at school, eh, that was at se that that that was just kind of, you know that's kind of me just trying to run through it quick to came up second year, eh, once I got so far I at the school I ended up no going, cos I felt like I wasn't getting anywhere, you know and you were just we just done remedial all the time you didnae you didnae get to associate, you just were kinda blocked off for this and that so you didnae get…interacting with other kids so you were made to feel different in a way eh to be quite honest*
>
> and
>
> *people don't understand the way dyslexics and that are eh…they think likes of here oh just do this eh, in the class it's aw [big sigh] to say the least it's, it's a nightmare it's like being back at school, like it's that it's that it's that kind of feeling (Graham)*

Like Alison, Graham struggled to abandon the sense of self he had formed at school, and it now impacted his college studies. Asked to complete assignments he felt were beyond his ability, he struggled and did not achieve. To Graham, the assignments seemed unfair and overly complex, and we sense that he finds himself on a college course that is inappropriate for his level. Whatever the reason for Graham's current course, it seems it cannot offer any escape from his previously formed negative sense of self, as it validates his belief that he is less able than others. However,

even for Graham, whose self-belief appears tightly linked to his early education, persistence in college seems to support a transformation. Talking about his reading and writing difficulties, Graham addresses what he believes may be others' opinions:

> *People's heads work different. People, if it's not there, it's not there. Right? Do you understand what I'm saying? Doesn't mean to say I'm daft, I'm stupid, or anything like that like it or eh…eh or anybody else like kind of thing like eh? Eh, just because we can't read and write, kind of thing like, or or if you can't spell like eh, spelling's a a a you can't see it (Graham)*

Graham attempts to identify as 'someone who can' instead of 'someone who cannot'. He is determined to show others that he is different but able, demonstrated by his desire to ensure people understand that his difficulties do not define him as *'daft'* or *'stupid'*. Speaking in the third person, Graham distances himself from others' beliefs, and it appears that doing this helps him see himself as different but able. He places himself with similar others, finding a shared sense of self with others who struggle academically. It might be the shared experiences with other struggling students that help him redefine himself. No longer requiring *'special'* education, he can see how he fits within wider society. Seeing other students with similar difficulties accessing the same college, course, and support services, he begins to see himself as different but equal. I will revisit and elaborate on this in the next sub-theme.

These participants' stories help illuminate the positive transformation that can occur during persistence at college, but it is equally important to consider the negative transformations. Only Rebecca's interview highlighted a transformed sense of self that appeared ultimately harmful. While others revealed negative aspects, hers pointed to a positive sense of self that was transformed almost beyond repair. Like several others, Rebecca had struggled throughout her schooldays due to dyslexia:

> *Inadequate. Inadequate em, like you weren't basically good enough maybe maybe because like in my own heart I feel like, if you weren't normal like [crying]…if you have a disability, if you have a disability you would be ok, but when people don't have understand dyslexic, I'm sorry I keep going on about dyslexia being dyslexic {no that's ok} but [inaudible – that's me?] and em, yeah, I just felt like cos I wasn't normal (Rebecca)*

Believing her dyslexia made her different and abnormal, she seems embarrassed by her dyslexia itself and by her inability to see past this difficulty. In college, she also fought against a belief that she was *'stupid'*:

> *I felt like I was back at high school and being being…being stupid, em, I* felt *stupid (Rebecca)*

Rebecca's first extract above highlights how devastating her schooldays had been. Any sense of self she formed at that time was likely to be negative and based on a perceived lack of normality or ability. However, while we can sense her early negative sense of self remains part of her, as she recalls it when describing more recent events, we can also see a shift. With pressures of college reminding her of her schooldays, her natural response is to revisit her previous sense of self, when she had believed she was *'stupid'*. However, Rebecca's shift from *'being'* to *'feeling'* stupid shows her sense of self has altered over time, to a point where she can accept stupidity as a feeling rather than a trait. In many ways, Rebecca seems clear about her sense of self. She reminds herself of who she is and talks herself out of becoming something she is not and has never been, and at this point, we can see a sense of self that focuses on the positive:

> *my dad surprisingly did say with this course he says, and it's not like my dad, he says 'Rebecca, we've seen you for months and you're just getting yourself so upset just just quit' and I was like that 'quit?' I was like 'that's not like my dad', my dad'll only ever say 'no come on just try' try', not like over forcing me to be doing this, he wouldn't do that, but just like oh, and I think when I reflected on that I'm like 'no I can't, can't dad, got got to', and I take stock and then just rebate reval revalue reevaluate myself and I just say 'come on Rebecca, you're not a quitter, you've never quit, just get on with it' (Rebecca)*

Rebecca is clear she is not *'a quitter'* and is unwilling to change her sense of self for the sake of difficult times at college. Her need to *'re-evaluate'* herself demonstrates how difficult it has been for Rebecca at some points, as she has had to remind herself of her sense of self and not allow herself to change despite the difficulties. Over time, however, it becomes clear that Rebecca's sense of self has altered to become increasingly negative:

> *I would probably say it's I'm like, I would say I'm staying in more, I enjoy I'm such a person I like I like going out I just stay in and just just concentrate on doing the work kind of, a wee bit more like, I am a bit more like...a recluse cos I before I would be out walking but I I'm too absorbed of study, I've got to study, I've got to study, I've got to study and I'm not giving myself a good break, so em...yeah em, I've, yeah and plus, staying indoors, not exercising, putting on weight, it's just it's just the rigmarole it just just affects your confidence in the general general health (Rebecca)*

Previously an outgoing character, Rebecca commented on the changes she saw within herself, becoming what she classed as *'a recluse'*. Issues Rebecca faced over the year significantly impacted her, changing her habits, state of mind, and mental and physical health. The way she describes her need to study and work hard suggests her course has become all-consuming, taking over every aspect of her life. We get the impression here that Rebecca has become a person whom even she struggles to recognise.

Participant	Extract	Page; line number
Adam	I was in em…transition	5; 96
Andrew	where I am *now*...on this year of *learning*	5; 92
Katie	I started fae the bottom	25; 534
Sam	I can laugh now but	21; 454
Taylor	obviously it's made me stronger as a person	27; 566
		n = 9

Figure 14 - Theme occurrences: Transformations

Fitting in while standing out

Despite differences, participants were often able to find common ground and shared group values. For some, this came naturally through friendships, with shared and positive experiences. However, there was a desire to formulate friendships or allies based on negative experiences and shared difficulties for others. Their perceived differences ranged from family background to coping strategies, but the most impactful differences they spoke of were age and disability. This final section of the theme shares the participants' stories about how they saw themselves as different, how they used those differences to form groups of similar others, and how they used those groups to support their persistence.

'Difference' is not synonymous with problems. While most participants saw their differences as problematic, at least in the first instance, both Taylor and Alison took pragmatic views of personal preference and difference:

> *I think I've done it the right way for myself but obviously, everybody's mental health affects differently. Em, but in, like I think that I have done it right for myself cos now I can go say to people that I didn't need help and I did it myself as a person, but obviously like I said that everybody's, like health affects them in different ways (Taylor)*
>
> and
>
> *I'm more used to it now, like, at first I thought it was normal. But then I seen my pals and I was sorta like 'this is not right' [whispering], but, then like I sorta taught myself, like ken there's my definition of normal and then, there's somebody else's. We canae have the same, can we? (Alison)*

According to Taylor, his refusal to accept formal support from college when he encountered personal challenges was the correct action. Accepting his struggles with mental health as different from others, he was content with his actions. His actions were 'normal', but he accepts that this may not be the case for others. Taylor is under no illusion that his difference is negative; it is simply the way he is. As a young carer, Alison was surprised to learn that her role in the home was unusual. Her experiences of growing up with caring responsibilities had created her

version of normality, to the extent that she perceived others' non-caring roles as unique. Her rational attitude when she realised her normality was different from others and how she *'taught'* herself to understand normal as a self-imposed concept may have helped her when dealing with some of her more challenging moments in life and college.

In contrast with Taylor and Alison's views of difference, in which their difference helped define them but in a positive way, participants with disabilities (mainly dyslexia) tended to see their difference as hampering their ability and as making them stand out as less worthy among their peers. For most participants, this sense of self had begun in school, and this had set them on a path that was difficult to avert in later years. Tristan remembered his schooldays with sadness:

> *Cos of, when I was at school, eh…I did get the feeling cos of I was doing the same work as everybody else and then I'd start of lagging behind everybody else, and then I just, couldn't keep up with everybody else (Tristan)*

Tristan's attendance at what he considered a school for high achievers posed difficulties, as his learning difficulty meant he could not keep up with his classmates. He compared himself to others and felt less able than them, and this may explain why he seems upset and, at times, angry with his dyslexia. Unable to see any positive in the challenges he faces, he feels withdrawn and separated from his peers. Graham and Stuart shared his view, and all three alluded to their dyslexia as a significant part of their challenges in college. Graham, in particular, seemed to resent his separation from other students during school, as this, in turn, led to him feeling different. Forced to join remedial classes instead of joining in with the mainstream group, he felt alienated and lacked the interaction he wanted with other children. The way Graham describes his schooldays suggests significant unhappiness and isolation, as he describes being *'blocked'* and confined to *'prison'*-like areas. The segregation Graham encountered has proved influential throughout his life, and his academic struggles serve as a continuous reminder of his difference.

Five of the 11 participants were 'mature' students, and while it seemed relatively unimportant to three participants, it caused some concern to two in particular. For those who appeared unconcerned with being a mature student, their dyslexia caused such discomfort that age was insignificant in comparison. In contrast, both Adam and Chris found their mature status challenging, but they dealt with the challenge in different ways. Adam, one of the oldest participants, had struggled to accept his mature status in a previous course:

> *Before I came to college…I found* that *really challenging...{did you?} One, because I was a mature student*
>
> and

> *it it's just, as a mature student, it's bloody, it's hard to assimilate yourself into college because it's like you just don't fit (Adam)*

Adam believed his age had been significant during his previous studies. How much of the difficulty he faced was age-related is difficult to ascertain; however, it was significant to Adam. He commented on his age several times during the interview, ranging from *'wasted time'* to *'because my age'*. It appears Adam does not identify solely as a student but as a student whose age impacts his life and studies. Unlike Chris, whose thoughts focused on what others might think of him, Adam seems surer of the difficulties his age causes in college. He does not talk of finding it difficult to assimilate himself; instead, he suggests it is hard for any mature student. Although seeing himself as part of this category, Adam is clear he is not alone. With most of his classmates far younger than he is, he is clear that neither he nor any other mature student could fit into the group. Chris, a mature student, but arguably still young in terms of the FE population, focused more on how others would view him, as though they would immediately see him as different:

> *That was at the time when I first went to go into a classroom, and I thought to myself "what you doing? You're too old for this, you're going into a classroom where you're almost ten years older than everybody, you're going to be laughed at, you're going to be looked as a fool, to try and do something that you should have done ten years ago" (Chris)*

Assuming others would laugh at him, Chris's perception of his age difference almost stopped him from starting the course. Whether or not Chris believes he is too old to study or if he were afraid that others would see him this way is unclear, but it seems that the fear of others noticing your difference may be too daunting for some. For Chris, his self-questioning attitude led him to fear that his status as an adult would conflict with his status as a student, and he had to find a way to manage both positions. He struggled to identify with his younger classmates but found himself joining in with, and even initiating, the immaturity he saw in those students:

> *That was the time where I thought about leaving, and there has been times throughout the course I've thought about leaving. It's…people's maturity levels, don't get me wrong, I'm not much better at times [laughing]. But I'm really I'm really not much better*
>
> and
>
> *Some of it…does grate on me, em, other times I join in [laughing] At other times it's sometimes I initiate it myself [laughing] (Chris)*

While Chris attempts to show his similarity to his younger classmates, his view that age is a barrier situates Chris immediately as different, whether or not his classmates agree. Despite his

dislike for their immaturity, to such an extent that he suggested it was one of his reasons for considering withdrawal, Chris quickly admitted that he could also act in this way. Faced with a large group of younger students, Chris may have felt the easiest option to survive the year was to fit in. Seeking solidarity among his younger classmates, and based on how he often saw them act, he accepted immaturity as a way to become 'one of them'. Whether Chris would have acted in this way within an older group is impossible to say. However, his desire to fit in with the group whom he had earlier assumed would laugh at his age seems to have engendered in Chris a feeling that he must attempt to be part of the group in any way possible. It appears, for some students, that their perceived difference can be so impactful that finding common ground is crucial to support persistence.

Chris's determination to become part of a group and avoid being seen as different saw him use his mature status to maintain connections with the 'serious' side of the class while simultaneously using his immaturity to *'join in'* with those he found annoying. When rifts appeared between classmates, he was then able to use both his maturity and his immaturity to ensure he remained part of both *'camps'*:

> *I thought about leaving, over that because just the amount of drama that it caused the amount cos it's now the class is now in two different camps, and it's now me in the middle, because I'm really, excuse the French don't give a shit [laughing]. I really couldn't care less about it if you're, if that's really what you want to do, that's fine (Chris)*

Unwilling to side with either, Chris found his place between the groups, the option which ensured access to the entire group rather than one part. He attempted to maintain his integration and security, so if one group broke down in the future, he would retain his place in the other.

The desire to fit in appears to be made stronger by differences, and it seems college offers students an opportunity to exchange a life spent standing out for one in which they can fit in and become one of the crowd. For Alison, this involved turning her back on her proven track record, even ridding herself of her academic ability in a bid to fit in:

> *Cos when I went on to the care course that I was on, I was known as the one that's got all the information about care because obviously I'm a carer, and noo, I'm going onto a course where I still have like experience with [subject removed for confidentiality] and that because I done it at high school, but I'm sort of starting off like everybody else, so it's not "oh she's the one with everything that she kens" (Alison)*

Unlike others who hoped to use their ability or shared experiences to form bonds, Alison felt her knowledge and ability set her apart. Upon changing subjects, she wanted to be the same as others,

someone with little or no experience of the subject who would not stand out amongst her peers. Therefore, she shunned the subject in which she was knowledgeable in a bid to fit in with others, opting to begin her studies in the same way as others, with no previous knowledge. For Alison, fitting in was of greater importance than her proven ability to work and study within a particular field.

Attempting to avoid detection as 'different', participants combined their shared difference to show how 'normal' their difference made them. This idea was particularly noticeable among the participants who had dyslexia. The remainder of this theme focuses on dyslexia as it was of particular importance to over half of the participants. Making connections through their shared difficulties, the participants used their dyslexia as a way of fitting in when they might have otherwise felt different. To them, dyslexia created a bond with similar students:

> *trying to trying to make people understand, like eh, and it's so frustrating, so frustrating to me, Tony, and I I reckon a few other dyslexic folk out there like kind of like*
>
> and
>
> *It's, eh, so frustrating…because you want to do good. I think anybody with dyslexia wants to do good like eh, ken? And there's a few here eh…eh…eh you know (Graham)*

Graham believed his frustration with college challenges was often due to dyslexia, but he was keen to explain that he was not alone in this. Not only was he part of a group of students with dyslexia, but he was also part of a group for whom frustration and dyslexia were inseparable. Graham imposes his frustration on his friend, Tony, and then extends this to others for whom he has no evidence of frustration. Graham was so keen to show similarities among people with dyslexia and demonstrate he is not alone that he presumes their inner-most ambitions as though he speaks on their behalf. Graham's belief in people with dyslexia shows he truly sees them as the same. He cannot consider a world in which there may be good and bad characters with dyslexia, and he assumes their dyslexia makes them alike. Their likeness is no longer merely academic or literacy-related; it has instead become all-encompassing. Stuart takes this one step further and has become so utterly integrated within the groups of people with dyslexia that he has begun to see those without dyslexia as outsiders with no opportunity to become part of this 'elite' group:

no-one will know unless you've got it…and trying to say that to people is like 'yeah we do, we do, we do, we do' and you're sitting there like what, so you've got dyslexia? Eh, no, no you don't. Like, so you won't understand what's going through our heads. Cos we had a, there's four of us had a conversation in class about it all, and whatever we said, the way we said it, we all understood it, and the helpers, and the tutors, and the other students in our class did not understand one part of it, but all, the ones that did understand all had the same thing. And I was like 'that's what it should be like, for people with that sort of stuff', but it's…{Yeah, you just think in a different way} That's what I mean it's, makes more sense if we all had the same problems, or if we didn't have any problems it would be even better [laughing]. (Stuart)

and

The way I said it to them, right, I was like "there's me, Kenny, you know, and another two people in my class that are dyslexic, and don't understand it…as much as everyone else, but, when us four talk together about the same stuff that they were talking about in class, we understand each other". And trying to tell that to…sorry I shouldn't use this 'normal' people that don't have that it's like basically talking to a brick wall cos they're like "you can do that, you can do this, don't give up, don't give up". It's like we're doing this, we're doing that is like, we're trying, our best (Stuart)

Stuart has become so entrenched in his status as a part of this group of people with dyslexia that he struggles to comprehend life outside the group. He automatically assumes life would be better if everyone were the same, yet his immediate suggestion is for everyone to have dyslexia. When Stuart suddenly asserts that everyone not having dyslexia would be better, he laughs as though he cannot imagine this scenario. His description of those outside the group even takes on a derogatory tone as he attempts to explain how they cannot comprehend a group of people with dyslexia. Stuart explains how he and his group members can understand their college work when discussing it together but that people without dyslexia cannot help them. His description suggests that they have formed some secret society, one in which only students with dyslexia can take part. Describing the positive impact this has on the group's ability, Stuart decries anyone without dyslexia, suggesting 'normality' is a negative trait. Likening himself to students in a similar position to himself, Stuart holds on to his place in a group. He acts as a spokesperson for students with learning difficulties, whom he believes have been let down. Highlighting the group's size, he points to a significant population, inferring the group's size increases its importance:

> *we knew what we were here for a purpose, but when we got told there was over a hundred students that are needing one on one support, and there was only 4 to 6 teachers in a week, and I was like "what's the actual point of having a hundred teachers or a hundred students needing support if you can't handle only 4 of us in one class?" And I'm like "you should be allowed to do that"…it doesn't matter what they say they should end up getting people in to help, cos it's no, it's not our fault (Stuart)*

Stating that staff were unable to *'handle only four of us'* places him and his fellow students in a group of challenging students, suggesting they are different to others and more inclined to cause problems. However, Stuart does not see this as negative as he is content with being part of any group, regardless of its status. This 'in it together' attitude seems to strengthen the students' persistence. It appears it somehow softens the difficulties and gives them an opportunity in which to vent their frustrations and to share their challenges, which Katie's extract further demonstrates:

> *Eh, speak to, one of my friends who are in the course with me, she goes through similar things and we just try and, motivate each other…We'd like, have a break, sit and speak about it…try and like relax yourselves and then we're ready to go back and try again (Katie)*

While Katie's experience is similar to the other students with dyslexia, her part in a group comes from the group's motivation and support. Experiencing *'similar things'* to others is comforting, as they can understand one another's predicaments. The way Katie describes her friends as *'in the course with [her]'* suggests collusion, like Stuart's secretive society of students with dyslexia. Katie seeks shared experience to increase understanding, and she uses this as a form of motivation, which she may otherwise not gain from alternative sources.

While some participants resented their differences as they created challenges and barriers to successful studies and integration, others embraced their differences, seeing them as positive facts of life. Those who embraced their differences did so with a sense of defiance and pragmatism, accepting difference as something with the potential to make life more interesting. However, for those carrying resentment, the challenge of fitting in when they feel at odds with the general college population adds complication to an already stressful situation. Interestingly, those who seem most at ease with their differences and the challenge of fitting in are those who discussed mental health difficulties. Those who struggled did so with learning difficulties and age-related differences. The recent increased focus on openness about mental health encourages students to accept mental health challenges and to refrain from feeling embarrassed or intolerant. In comparison, there has been little focus on public acceptance of academic challenges or age discrimination.

Participant	Extract	Page; line number
Andrew	just weird enough	2; 21
Rebecca	things got into place that got more, as I say simplified for me or or different	18; 367
Sam	I was never really going to be one of *them*	16; 334
		n = 11

Figure 15 - Theme occurrences: Fitting in while standing out

Summary

The theme of disruption to the sense of self highlights how the passage of time and social connections interrupt and challenge individuals' self-perception. Participants' extracts reveal how time spent at college, particularly challenging times, encourages students to consider their sense of self and challenge their self-belief. While students appear, in many ways, to begin college with firm beliefs of 'who they are', those beliefs are often negative and stem from earlier experiences of education and others' perceptions. Their persistence at college allows them to challenge those beliefs, as they have time to reflect and seek change. Their social interactions help them make the most of their time, as they connect with others and use shared experiences to form bonds and contemplate their sense of self. The participants' experiences point to a sense of self initially formed before college, but that can be shaped and altered over time. Time spent persisting at college and those with whom the persistence experience is shared help students to reshape and rediscover their sense of self, at times overcoming beliefs about themselves that are no longer valid.

5.2 'Just getting on with it': the push and pull of motivation

Introduction

Participants demonstrated varying levels of motivation, with ups and downs throughout their courses. While they often considered themselves the only factor in their motivation, their narratives reveal far more complexity and an interplay between themselves, others, their past, present, and future lives. The following section shows some of those motivating factors and the complexity contained within.

Precarious motivation

It appears that motivation has the power to change lives. It functions as a driving force and serves as a commitment to accept the challenge to improve how we feel about ourselves. By harnessing our inner-most feelings and our future aspirations, we can cast aside that which brings us down to focus on exciting futures with endless possibilities. Chris's following extract illustrates how embracing his internal motivation has helped him see his potential when he has previously

abandoned hope. When Chris decided to leave his steady, albeit monotonous, career, he did so for his future. He could have continued his life as it was, but he could see it was affecting his mental health. When he considered his path, he took motivation from how he wanted to feel; he wanted to feel a renewed sense of purpose and energy. Chris did not blame his career or other people for the course his life was on, but he harnessed his lack of motivation for life and turned it into something positive. In doing so, Chris did not only find his renewed sense of purpose and energy, it altered his entire *'mindset'*:

> *I wasn't giving my mind any kind of…task, if that makes sense. You stack a shelf, you go home, you watch the Simpsons, and you go to your bed, that's it. And I think that what that's what caused it. I think it's, what makes me feel, more confident within myself is, I get up in the morning because I've got a purpose. There's there's you're there to educate yourself, to improve your own life [upset]. And I feel as though that's what's improved…sort of my mindset, if that's the right way (Chris)*

Chris did not look to anyone else to motivate him. His words suggest a 'Groundhog Day' existence that was unfulfilled and uninspiring. Potentially trapped in this existence, Chris used his motivation to move forward, and now his newfound existence provides the motivation he previously lacked. To change a life course takes courage, and the courage Chris displayed was based on his motivation and desire for a brighter future. Alison's extract echoes some of Chris's sentiment. However, while Chris was able to look back on what had been, and was confident in the moves he had made, Alison was still considering her move:

> *I think I'm going to just keep doing it, like, it's something I want to dae, and like, I've got the support there, I've got Jennifer there, ken? I've got guidance, I've got my lecturers, like, I've got my two best pals, so like, just getting on with it noo. Cos I want to get onto my HND (Alison)*

Alison took 'stock' of what she had and carefully thought about her future and how she could feasibly reach it. Not looking, at this point, for others to motivate her, she knew she needed their support and guidance to achieve her goals. Alison has not yet made her decision. While we see Chris's contentment, and the ownership he now has of his decisions and motivations, Alison seems less determined to significantly alter her life. Unlike Chris and Alison, Sam's focus was not always on herself. Instead, she spoke of what was *'right'* and what she considered appropriate in the circumstances. Sam seems morally obliged to continue her studies, as though she must complete what she began. Like Alison, we sense Sam is still attempting to convince herself that she is making the right decision, and that, unlike Chris, she is still unsure:

> *I think I think you just have to decide what's right for you and then like stick with it. Sometimes it's not it might not actually be what works out the best for you but, but it's good to stick with it and see it through if that's what you've gone for (Sam)*

All three participants have reached a stage in their persistence where they must consider their choices. While Chris is content and can look back on earlier choices, Alison and Sam are still looking forward. We sense that they can see or are beginning to see their future as theirs, and they are becoming more comfortable accepting their part in those futures.

It seems that seeing themselves in a new, unfamiliar light provides the impetus to persist, regardless of how difficult circumstances might be. The increased confidence that comes from overcoming obstacles and defeating negative thoughts can be just as motivational as the initial desire to overcome the challenges. In the following extract, we see that Adam's college successes invigorated him in much the same way as Chris's new career path. Chris turned his back on his old life and self; Adam, in contrast, was turning his back on those who had doubted him:

> *Aw aw it made me feel* great, *that's what I was like that's what I was like a ha ha, just, in my head, going you can get, I'm doing this {yeah}, no-one's stopping me (Adam)*

The elation Adam described when he succeeded and his sense of having defeated past struggles is adrenaline-like. While he seems surprised at his ability and glad of his achievements, he seems to accept his 'winning streak' as though it were long overdue. Like the sportsman he once was, we can envisage an athlete running, with no plans to stop until he reaches the finishing line. For Adam, who has felt lost and valueless, the long-awaited achievement instils confidence and motivation that were otherwise lacking. No longer feeling inadequate and inconsequential, Adam delights in his ability with the words *'I'm doing this'*. Like with Chris, we see the cyclical effect of Adam's internal motivation, as he harnesses the motivation brought on by his success to motivate him further. Embracing his newfound success and motivation, Adam simultaneously defends his position from any potential threat. Unwilling to succumb to any put-downs or negative influences, he laughs *('a ha ha'*) and exclaims, *'you can get', 'no-one's stopping me'*. Potentially innocuous phrases, we begin to see how it is necessary to guard against others' criticisms to defend one's internal motivation. While internal motivation is powerful, it is also seemingly fragile.

Rebecca echoes this apparent fragility. Her words demonstrate that even amid particularly stressful times when instinct might be to shy away from difficulties, she instead wants to *'start typing…do something'*, as though her effort will be what motivates her:

> *everything's a is bad, everything's just, and you just don't want to you, you just want to cocoon yourself, em, but yeah I feel, if I can get this, I just want to start typing, I just want to do something, I just want to complete it, em, but yeah I can't believe that, like from all those months, I can't believe actually this is probably this is the most been most stressful one {uh huh} em, because of my kind of the lack of knowledge maybe I shouldn't have chose this chose this course, but I've been persistent to do it, get on with it (Rebecca)*

Rebecca's overwhelming need to complete forces her to harness this desire and use it for action. By beginning an assignment, she can build momentum, which will help her overcome challenges and provide additional motivation along the way. Despite the apparent stresses she has encountered, which have made her want to *'cocoon'* herself, she believes it is up to her to take the first step towards completion. She demonstrates the power of her motivation which will see her through the difficult times ahead if she can maintain it.

The desire to complete varies among individuals, and while for some it is strong enough to provide motivation and act as an incentive, for others, it is less powerful:

> *I mean, I h h h I think I've had a fair few reasons to leave…but, I think, if I just stick it out and I get this qualification it'll it'll make my time worth more…than if I just left and then had to go through the hassle of getting a job (Tristan)*

Tristan's extract above reveals a student who is 'hanging on'. He remains in college, but his desire to complete comes from a desire to avoid *'hassle'*. Tristan's claim that he has had several reasons to withdraw reveals a fear of withdrawal, as though he may need to convince himself and others that leaving is acceptable. For Tristan, who raises concerns about his parents' attitudes towards his education, his feelings are not enough. While his extract suggests he is tired of his studies, as though he has had 'enough' and would prefer to leave, Tristan teeters on the edge of any decisions as though none of his *'reasons to leave'* are substantial enough. Knowing that job hunting is likely to be difficult, Tristan opts for the easier option. Unlike Chris, whose potentially bright future after college helped him remain, for Tristan, it was the opposite – he saw the future as bleak and saw college as an alternative to facing that bleakness.

It appears that, while motivation to complete comes from an innate desire to achieve, it also depends on achievement. The interdependence of motivation and achievement may help build momentum, but it may also add to the fragility. Any natural determination exhibited among students can be quickly derailed by a lack of achievement, demonstrating how some students may inadvertently become stuck in a vicious cycle of low motivation and achievement. Stuart demonstrates the impact of derailment when his motivation and achievements are at a low point. Considering his lack of achievement, he simultaneously considers the courage he has shown up to this point. Caught up in assignments that seem impossible, Stuart begins to lose his motivation,

courage and belief in himself. Believing his *'guts [have] run out'*, he is now stuck in this vicious cycle, where his motivation has waned, his achievements have lowered, and without achievements to bolster his motivation, he sees no way out. In many instances throughout the interview, Stuart demonstrated motivation based on his difficulties, alluding to his difficulties making him stronger and more resilient to challenges. At this point, however, it seems that despite attempts to overcome those challenges, he has lost all momentum and is no longer able to demonstrate courage in the face of adversity:

> *Like I don't stop until I, like, as people said, it takes guts to do what I'm doing, with what I've got wrong with me. I'm like "aye", but there's a, there's enough guts to, to go for it, but there's a point that, that some of your guts run out. And I'm, pretty much at the run out bit [laughing], which is annoying (Stuart)*

Not only can we see how precarious motivation can be, but we can also see how lost motivation results in disappointment, as it reinforces a lack of achievement and a lack of courage.

Participant	Extract	Page; line number
Andrew	*it's better for you to stick through it*	23; 494
Taylor	*I just wanted to do it myself, and say that I have done it*	26; 555
		n = 9

Figure 16 - Theme occurrences: Precarious motivation

The social embeddedness of motivation

Motivation's precarious nature and its tendency to ebb and flow bring challenges. To overcome those challenges and stabilise their motivation, participants described mixed and sometimes conflicting approaches. Participants often saw their motivation as entirely independent of themselves; to them, they persisted because or on behalf of others. The following extracts demonstrate the extent to which others were crucial to their persistence motivation.

It seems motivation is a group effort, requiring acceptance, agreement, and support from others. However, this presents challenges, as when motivation from others takes centre stage, it threatens to suppress our internal motivation. All participants accepted motivation from others, albeit to varying degrees and in different ways. However, while some used it to bolster their motivation, two saw it as their only driving force. The extracts below, from Katie and Alison, demonstrate this utter reliance on others:

> *So I think that really…like pushed me…So if it wasnae for having other people there, I think I would've just gave up completely (Katie)*

and

> *I think I'd be I be* lost *without Jennifer like. Jennifer has got me through some stuff in the last three years like. Literally, I owe it to her where I am the noo…definitely (Alison)*

While some descriptions merely hinted at others' motivation, both Katie and Alison readily acknowledged its utmost importance. Katie's willingness to accept others as the driving force behind her persistence suggests she sees herself as having had little-to-no involvement. Without her *'other people'*, Katie is sure she would have given up and cannot see how she could have persisted without their support. While Katie has no doubt benefitted from support, we are left wondering why she feels so indebted to others, and why she feels so little sense of self-accomplishment for her achievements and persistence. Alison's experience was similar, but she focused her reliance on one staff member in particular. Her support worker, Jennifer, became so significant that Alison was sure she would have been unable to succeed without her. So meaningful was their relationship that Alison no longer saw Jennifer as college staff; she was beginning to see her as part of her family:

> *Like, Jennifer is like a big sister to me even though she works here like. Cos I've never had like an older role model, like, cos my mum's always been ill {uh huh}, it's like, she's an older role model for me and she's like "ken you can do this", ken? Just encouraging me {yeah that's good}, and I think that just helps, a lot (Alison)*

Alison's view of Jennifer as family and as an *'older role model'* suggests she has struggled to find a similar role model in her home life. Later suggesting her home life is *'chaotic'*, we see Alison clinging to any sense of stability through the college staff she relies on during periods of unrest. Like Katie, Alison places complete faith in college support staff, believing they are her reason for persistence and taking little responsibility for motivating herself through difficult times. Alison's relationship with Jennifer is based on trust and support and has developed over Alison's three years at college. Seeing Jennifer as her primary motivation, Alison has come to rely on her increasingly, with their relationship becoming one of friendship instead of a staff-student relationship. The reliance Alison has placed on Jennifer has moved Jennifer from authority figure to friend/family/carer. Jennifer's support has motivated Alison to continue, helped her through difficult times, and shown her she can succeed. Whether Alison would have persisted without Jennifer's support is impossible to say. Still, like with Katie, we are left wondering why Alison seems unable to take responsibility for her success and how she will cope upon leaving college and Jennifer's support.

Like Alison and Katie, other participants benefitted from the motivation and support others offered. In contrast, however, the support they accepted seemed to complement and reinforce the motivation and commitment they exhibited. Although grateful for the support, they did not see support staff as friends. Instead, they accepted the support and saw it as combining with support

from friends and family to make persistence easier. Rebecca's extract shows how others have played a large part in her success, but she talks of them providing support for what was 'her' work:

> *Em…eh, having a good source of friends, em, people that can actually em…like they they they've like em with people that know like how to understand like like proofread eh just the learning support there em and some someone with knowledge of the subject, that's helped me tremendously em…otherwise I would have...I would definitely I wou I wouldn't have got where, I am just now, I would have definitely quit (Rebecca)*

We see the group effort from Rebecca and her 'others'; she can see how instrumental staff and friends have been. Still, she retains a sense of personal motivation and ability by realising that she needed support for some areas and not others. For example, Rebecca relied upon academic support, and she may have withdrawn without it. Crucially, however, she acknowledges the support and its help in maintaining her motivation. She sees *'where [she is] just now'* and how this is due to the embeddedness of different types of support for different problems.

The motivation offered by support from others strengthens one's drive. However, as we have seen already, in some cases, our relatedness to others prompts the belief that motivation is no longer 'ours'. Instead, the motivation becomes 'provided' purely by staff, family, and friends. Then, rather than adding to our motivation with that gleaned from others, we replace our own with theirs. However, this reliance on others does not relate only to motivation 'from' others. Some participants revealed a further complication when they were motivated 'for' others.

Persistence, it seems, is not a solitary endeavour. What begins as a desire to persist for oneself can become deeply embedded within relationships. Those relationships are uniquely personal, but exploring significant others can reveal motivations to persist that we might otherwise neglect. It may be that challenging times, such as those requiring effort to persist in college, accentuate the need for relationships, as relationships serve to buffer against those challenges. Participants revealed complex relationships that moved from 'supporting' their motivation to 'being' their motivation. This shift was particularly noticeable with Sam's interview when she described her significant others:

> *my mum would go mental at me if I didn't come back. And th it's it's not like I only go to college cos of my mum eh? It, I want to do this…I want it cos I don't want to be bringing up kids and no having any career to go to…I don't have kids you know but…one day, and I'll want them to be proud of me like I am with my mum eh? (Sam)*

Sam's words suggest fearful respect and pride for her mother. She hints at defiance, as though suddenly aware of how she might appear, not wanting to appear controlled in any way by her

mother. Sam appears caught between being a child trying to live up to her mother's expectations and becoming an adult with future children of her own. Having seen her mother's success over the years, of which she is fiercely proud, Sam is keen to demonstrate her ability to be equally successful. While her future vision is unclear throughout the interview, she is clear that she intends to succeed both in the workplace and as a mother. However, Sam's desire for a successful career seems based on her desire for her future children to be proud and not on an inner sense of achievement. While future children drive Sam, this seems driven by her relationship with her mother, and we sense that she may be motivated by a need for her mother to reciprocate the pride she feels. We begin to see Sam considering her own needs when she talks of having a '*career to go to'*, and it looks, however briefly, as though she is motivated by a career. However, as this thought trails off and she reverts to thinking of others, we are reminded that motivation is complex and embedded within relationships, even in relationships yet to begin.

While relationships might act as a buffer to challenging experiences, we see from Sam that the motivation they provide can, at times, prove challenging. This finding was clear from several participants, whose relationships appeared to provide motivation based on expectation, obligation, and a desire not to let others down. For example, Adam's family had assumed he would continue studying, and their assumption, combined with his desire to please them, left him feeling he could not *'back out'*. Using this as motivation to continue, his family's faith in him served to push Adam forward when he might otherwise have halted his studies. Despite reservations, he seems unable to resist the opportunity to make them proud. As someone who previously had and lost a successful career, Adam had already experienced his family's pride. Still, the shame of his subsequent challenges cast doubt over any potential to regain their respect.

In contrast, Tristan had always felt 'less' than his siblings, and his relationship with his parents appears more one of pressure. Resenting any perceived comparisons drawn between his siblings and himself, Tristan felt 'less than' and inadequate:

> *Th th that [sigh] is…it's just eh, it makes me feel really…sort of just like crap though, because, if they're, because they're trying to get into like Oxford and Cambridge…I'm in I'm in here…and then, my sister's trying to get into university, I can understand that, but…if you're putting up me up against people that are trying to get into Oxford or Cambridge I mean, come on [laughing] (Tristan)*

Fearing his family's views and expectations, Tristan struggled to discuss his feelings about his course with them. He seems shackled to his course due to fear of disapproval, as though he cannot leave. His phrase *'I'm in here'* sounds prison-like, as though he is at college against his wishes. We know Tristan is not physically locked in; still, he is locked in by his perceived obligation to persist, as he considers his parents' views on withdrawal and how they would feel if he were to

leave. Tristan has embraced his expectations and assumptions and used them to push himself through a course he does not enjoy. His extracts reveal something of the importance of family and their support with persistence. However, the family support offered in Tristan's case is very different to that offered to other participants. Most participants spoke of the emotional support they received, and for some, the support was subject-related. Several spoke of potential disappointment or anger of family if they were to withdraw; all except Tristan did so jovially. While Sam suggested her mother would *'go mental'*, and Stuart believed his grandmother would '*slap his arse'*, their words were said in jest. We sense that while they knew their family members would be disappointed, their opinions were valuable but not critical. In contrast, Tristan shared a genuine concern that his mother, in particular, would not support his decision:

> *I've I said that to my dad and he he said 'well, I mean if it's not for you it's not for you, I can understand that'…[big inhale] I've not said anything to like that to my mum…cos I I I don't think that she would take that very well…{ok} She I mean she hasn't taken it very well that I'm saying I don't want to do HNC (Tristan)*

It seems, then, that relationships influence students and that that influence often serves to promote persistence. However, relationships are prone to breakdown. What happens when a student's motivation to persist is based purely on a relationship that no longer exists? Two participants spoke of their loss when their grandparents passed away. For Stuart, his loss did not deter him; in many ways, it spurred him on. Determined not to let his late grandmother down, Stuart used her memory to reinvigorate his motivation. Forcing himself to think about what she would have said to him, he takes her advice regardless of her absence. Convinced that *'if she was here, she'll have been wanting [him] to try and stay on'*, he remains considerate of his grandmother, and her passing does not lessen his desire to make her proud.

However, loss affects people differently. While Stuart's loss spurred him on, the loss of Tristan's grandfather was demotivating, and the following extract reveals the extent to which their relationship had been crucial:

> *eh well, at* home *it was just…my my grandad* died *so,* he *really sort of pushed me towards that, engineering, because he was doing engineering in the world war, well 2 [big inhale].and, I I I think it's when he di I just kinda lost all…just…like, the* power*…just couldn't be* bothered*, really (Tristan)*

Close to his grandfather, Tristan had studied a subject that was dear to his grandfather's heart, providing a link to bridge the generation gap. However, when his grandfather passed away, he lost more than a family member. Losing his grandfather coincided with, or perhaps triggered, a lost connection with the subject and lost motivation, as though the three were inseparable. This finding reminds us of the complex interplay between motivation and relationships, and we

question whether Tristan's motivation was 'from' or 'for' his grandfather. Perhaps searching for a familial connection based on mutual appreciation and admiration, Tristan's words suggest he found that through his grandfather. The connection that 'powered' his motivation and, therefore, his persistence, which seems absent from other family relationships, may have provided the momentum to persist as a way of making his grandfather proud. However, persisting to make family proud relies on that relationship's continuation; when one party is no longer there, the motivation to persist is gone.

Participant	Extract	Page; line number
Adam	*family members just took it for granted and told everyone*	6; 119
Andrew	*my family convinced me to stay*	10; 210
Chris	*she said 'oh I'm very proud of you, I'm very proud of you you're actually…going to finish something*	29; 621
Graham	*if it wasn't cos my kids and I'd have been left here long ago*	23; 498
Stuart	*your gran wouldn't have wanted that*	67; 1465
		n = 10

Figure 17 - Theme occurrences: The social embeddedness of motivation

The persistence challenge

Participants demonstrated that motivation and its connection to relationships can be game-like. To be motivated to persist requires a reason, and at times that reason links to achievement or 'victory'. Persistence, and the motivation it requires, becomes competitive at times, but that competition is often concealed. However, motivation does not always come from the desire to 'win'; the desire not to lose can be just as powerful. It feeds commitment and a desire for control and provides a reason not to fail. In Alison's extracts, below, she speaks openly of not *'letting [others] win'* and how that links to her motivation to control her life and her relationships with others:

> *It felt it it, like, it's hard to explain. It made me feel like I was letting them win, like I was letting them get to me, and then I just decided it wasnae fair on me, because if I wanted to dae it I should be doing it, not letting any other people dictate my life, ken?*
>
> and
>
> *I always phone my mum. I dinae even speak to my mum half the time and then I'll be like 'mum!' [laughing] {and what would she say?} She would be like "dinae be a fanny" [laughing]. She would be like "are you really gonna let them win?", ken? (Alison)*

Alison reveals that both she and her mother see persisting as winning, while withdrawing is losing. However, her need to *'win'* is perhaps linked less to her desire to persist and more to her desire to prove others wrong. In turn, her need to prove others wrong motivates her to persist. For several participants, this need to prove others wrong was strong enough to encourage them to take on challenges from which others might have walked away. Their previous experiences, ranging from bullying to addiction, compelled them to continue, and they used their difficult pasts and others' cynicism as motivation. However, their ambitions and reasons to persist became muddied through their resolve, and their motivation to persist emerged as a side-effect of negative relationships.

Not all participants spoke explicitly of winning, yet their words often alluded to a sense of competition and victory. Andrew, for example, having faced bullying during his studies, was thrilled when staff removed his bullies from college. The removal of his opponents let Andrew win by default, and he kept his victory far from hidden:

> *Oh it was a fantastic day. First of all, it actually started off fantastic…see, not everyone likes the rain, but I do. And it started off…uh, raining fairly heavily, dark day, fantastic um…and, then when I get to college…he's not there? When I get into the first class…oh…and he's been kicked out well [rubbing his hands together in glee], today just gets better and better {uh huh} So, basically just kind of like, well this has made my day (Andrew)*

It seems that even when students have little motivation, winning against others can bolster what little motivation exists. Thus, what might initially be a demotivator can be manipulated and twisted to motivate. We saw in the previous sub-theme how relationships and their links to motivation present opportunities and challenges; what we see here is how the challenges can become opportunities.

When family or friends set the challenge, it might be easy to accept; we naturally want loved ones to be proud of us, so we become motivated to seek their pride. And while we are inclined to want to beat our enemies, we may naturally be less concerned with their opinions. However, when the relationship is respectful but not personal, for example, students with teaching staff, the situation becomes less straightforward. If students are pushed beyond their limits, the result is no longer motivation. Instead, the student may become disillusioned and demoralised. What should inspire disheartens. And what should challenge the student, ends up testing their resilience, patience, and motivation. Katie reveals the difficulty faced when the volume of assessments on her course became overwhelming:

> *I thought it would be less stress, less stressed out cos it was a it was a full year course {right} But, we just got stuff…chucked at us like every so often, so it was all like building up…[I felt] Quite…emotional and…stressed (Katie)*

Katie's comment reveals a sense of competition or game-like scenario when dealing with the volume of work and tutors' instructions. Work being *'chucked'* at them points to a perceived lack of thought from tutors as they decide assessment and submission dates, and this lack of thought resulted in mounting pressure and feelings of stress. Katie's language suggests a lack of care shown to students. We begin to imagine students trapped by the college as staff continuously throw assignments at them with no regard for their ability to cope. Others echoed this idea, revealing they felt tutors acted unfairly, created unnecessary obstacles, and even attempted to 'trick' students. Hiding revision materials, providing false revision 'clues', and disallowing reasonable adjustments were just some of the experiences students discussed. While there may be many reasons for each of these allegations (and it is not the purpose of this study to investigate student allegations), the common thread is not the alleged mistreatment of students; it is the perceived competition between staff and students. Whether encouraging independent learning in good faith or exhibiting power over students, the results are the same. Believing they are *'set…up to fail'* by the college, the unnecessary game in which the college uses perceived underhand tactics to win results in mistrust and demotivation among students.

Some participants shared their perceptions of how staff, particularly teaching staff, played games with their students, as though in a bid to see them fail. For Stuart, this related to rules and his perception of tutors changing rules of play depending on the student involved:

> *it's like…people talking about stuff like, 'oh we can do this, do this, do this, do this and that, I was like…then they come out with some mad stuff, you know? There's rules for people, and rules for others and it's like, what rules am I meant to follow then if there's rules for this person and rules for that person? It's like, my memory can't take…2 sets of rules at the same time (Stuart)*

Stuart's extract above reveals the confusion and distrust this caused. Convinced the ever-changing rules unfairly disadvantaged him, Stuart could not understand why this should be allowed. While Stuart showed, in other parts of the interview, that he was not afraid to break the rules (indeed, he did so zealously at times), his overwhelming struggle to follow some rules was due to misunderstanding them. The following extract expands on Stuart's perception of college as a *'game'*, as he shares his difficulty taking part in something he feels is beyond his level of ability:

It's annoying…it's it's like you're trying to do [sounds upset] it's like you try and play a game, and no reading the instructions, well, obviously I canae read instructions like, but, it's like everyone else playing a game, and no reading the instructions, and putting it in on the hardest level you can, at first, without actually trying it on the easiest or very easy levels (Stuart)

Stuart clarifies that rather than motivated by the challenge in front of him, he is demotivated. He is not encouraged to attempt the *'hardest level'*; instead, his lack of ability blocks him. Without the opportunity to work towards the difficulty, practising overcoming obstacles and picking up points along the way, he is thrust into a level for which he is unprepared.

Tristan also battled against the staff in what appeared to be a game-like situation. However, while Stuart felt out of his depth due to his perceived lack of ability, Tristan felt this way due to perceived underhand tactics of staff:

I think Jane, Jane's fine, Jane's, yeah she's fine but the lecturers, I think they could, it's it's depending on the lecturer though so, we've got one lecturer, who would give us stuff to study, but if we failed the test she will she won't tell tell us what we failed it on, so we couldn't study on that certain thing to do the resit…{right} Then we've got one lecturer, who doesn't give out anything to study, basically he says 'it's on the P drive, go, look it up', but when you go on, you find like a PowerPoint and then, you do the test, and none of that stuff was on it (Tristan)

Tristan believed the tutors had an unfair advantage against their students. He thought they held information back to retain the advantage, as though they wanted their students to fail. It appears that Tristan sees the lack of guidance as a punishment for failing their first attempts. In some cases, this battle of wills between staff and students may serve to motivate students. The desire to win may even be stronger when the opponent has power; to win against college and persist, despite additional challenges, might make the fight more worthwhile. For some, however, it has the opposite effect and leads to underhand tactics by both parties. As Tristan explains, his contempt for his tutor motivated him not to try harder but instead to cheat:

we had to put some licence le I cannot pronounce this word to save my life legislation {uh huh} on and I I used COSHH the 2002, and then apparently that was not [re]liable I went "ok, right I'll ch just change the legislation". I didn't change the legislation, I changed a few words and sent it back to him and he said that was fine {uh huh}…I I know people which have had to redo a whole thing and I just changed a few words (Tristan)

Tristan's extract demonstrates his contempt for his tutor, and he was not motivated to work harder. Instead, seeing the tutor's requirements as a game, he attempts to win by outsmarting him, as though to prove his tutors are not playing fairly. Tristan has lost faith in the system by this point and manoeuvres himself around the obstacles presented to win against lecturers who

have previously caused him difficulty. While these staff-related difficulties might engender some form of motivation, it is no longer motivation to persist. It is simply a side-effect of a negative relationship based on power and mistrust.

Participant	Extract	Page; line number
Adam	*I always like to prove people wrong*	35; 749
Chris	*I think it's all win win*	14; 291
Graham	*I didn't want to cheat because I felt that was cheating*	41; 876
Rebecca	*What's the point in throwing in the towel in now*	21; 444
Sam	*they know I must be like, maybe one of the top in the class*	17; 366
		n = 10

Figure 18 - Theme occurrences: The persistence challenge

Summary

Participants' extracts reveal the enormous complexity of motivation. They show no 'one' motivating factor for persisting in college and that motivation relies on many, sometimes conflicting factors that combine to help strengthen or lessen their drive. Relationships with their sense of self, past, present, and future, and with other people serve to make their motivation precarious and fragile. The often-cyclical effect of achievement and motivation can be replaced instantly with failure and demotivation, increasing its fragility. While persistence balances on a knife-edge for some students, relationships and support networks become increasingly important. Those relationships can, however, be just as fragile. While some positive relationships actively serve to promote motivation, other negative relationships promote it almost accidentally. However, both positive and negative relationships can be equally demotivating. Like their sense of self, the participants' experiences point to motivations that may form in their early lives but change over time and with the help of relationships. While early experiences and difficult relationships provided a motivational 'push' to persist, future aspirations and positive relationships served to 'pull' participants through their challenges. Apart, it seems neither the push nor the pull might be strong enough, but together they helped participants garner the strength and courage to persist.

5.3 'Did I just decide myself?' The ambiguity of agency

Introduction

This theme saw participants describe themselves as struggling with control over their lives, studies, and selves. Often unclear regarding their place within college and society, they described uncertainty over their futures, worries about the present and impacts of the past. It became clear how each area impacted their sense of agency and how relationships with others caused further uncertainty. This theme aims to demonstrate the varying degrees of agency, the development of

agency over time, and the complexity of dealing with difficult situations, by focusing on uncertainty, blame, and achieving agency.

An uncertain sense of agency

As we saw from previous themes, college can be a time of change, and this section reveals how individuals' sense of agency alters at college. Just as individuals' sense of self and motivations changed throughout the year, their sense of agency also changed. It appears that changes in agency are embedded in college and that acknowledging and accepting those changes is significant to those who persist. The participants' narratives reveal the dynamics between their past, present, and future, and the emotional impact of attempting to navigate their changing sense of agency. The temporality of agency becomes clear as we hear participants considering the importance of agency and how it has altered over time. The relatedness of agency to active engagement in the present was apparent in some participants' narratives, as they revealed their current uncertainty was based entirely on future worries or past challenges. Future concerns were most clearly demonstrated by Chris, for whom the immediate impact of beginning studying led to questioning, doubt, and an uncertain sense of agency. Chris's extract below reveals how far-reaching the doubt can be, as, upon beginning college, he questions how much control he has over the rest of his life:

> *at the end of the you you've gone through college you've got you've got your HN too, you've gone to university etc…you're…qualified…You've no guarantee of work...work comes as and when it does…you can be inundated with work one month, but you haven't got time to do…all the requests, and you might go for a few months where there isn't anything at all. Because there's no fixed income that's the sort of that would affect me when it comes to furthering life, tr trying to get a mortgage, cos they won't touch me, if I haven't got a fixed income coming in every month. And then it's working on how much can you afford every month? Do you live on bread and butter because you're scared of how much is gonna come in the month after that? Do you spend all your money and then have nothing left? Because you don't know when your next pay check's gonna be? (Chris)*

Uncertain economic times and limited access to employment are nationwide concerns; embarking on new studies and careers amplifies the worry. While education is currently 'free' in Scotland, there is more to being a student than tuition fees. Living, travelling, buying books and socialising are expensive, and many students rely on their future incomes to supplement bursaries through loans, overdrafts, and credit cards. For Chris, whose subject and potential career does not always offer a secure and steady income, the future begins to look less stable. As he questions every possibility and attempts to visualise potential scenarios, we see Chris beginning to doubt the choices he made in good faith. He appears to question the decisions he made based on ambition rather than security; while Chris could control his decisions, he now sees no control over his

future security. While colleges hope students will choose courses out of genuine interest and a desire to succeed in the subject, this idea has created an uncomfortable juxtaposition for Chris. In taking control of the present, he has, potentially, relinquished control of his future. It seems that a sense of agency is not based only on the present; the future has a clear impact on Chris's sense of agency.

While Chris's extract demonstrates agency's temporal embeddedness in individuals' lives, participants also demonstrated how it is socially embedded. As demonstrated in section 5.2 (The social embeddedness of motivation), persistence at college involves a network of people, including family, friends, teaching, and support staff. This network extends beyond motivation; it can help individuals recognise, understand, and appreciate their sense of agency. Unfortunately, it can also help diminish it. Taylor, one of the youngest participants in the study, presented himself as naturally agentic and as using his challenging past and hopeful future to exercise agency in the present. However, our conversations revealed uncertainty and a sense of agency that is unlike what he described. Others' influence over his past experiences, current circumstances, and his plans, revealed a desire for a greater sense of agency:

> *So that's why I'm doing this course again, and obviously that wasn't my fault, so I feel like I'm being punished if that makes any sense? I'm doing the course again cos I could have done the exam, I could have passed. Em…so then obviously stress with that, so, I felt like I was going to withdraw from that…but I was told to keep on…and I did and I did like keep on and everything and I wanted this qualification, so that's why I was told to do it again, next year, cos I did want it and they didn't want to mark me as a fail just in case I do fail it with stress. Em so they told me to do the course again this year and I have, and I've just stuck at it. Just I just wanted the qualification. I know I'm not doing. I was thinking about this for the past few weeks I don't want to do next year I want to take a year out of college. I want to, maybe a year or two, I want to find my own feet and do my own wee thing you know? (Taylor)*

Taylor's extract is similar in many ways to how other participants described their persistence. Their descriptions shifted between explanations of 'their' choice to study and 'others'' choice for them to study. While it was often unclear who had made the final decision to study, it was evident that it was rarely a solo decision. While accepting, in some way, of his perceived lack of control over his progress through college, Taylor questions why he had so little control. Fully understanding the college's position on his withdrawal the previous year and his need to repeat, Taylor highlights the complexity of conflicting ideals. At a difficult time, Taylor surrendered his control, allowing the college to make decisions for him. Allowing other, responsible, and trustworthy adults to take control at that point may have been not just beneficial but necessary. While this may have benefitted Taylor in the short-term, however, the longer-term impact on Taylor's has been a reduced sense of agency.

Taylor was not alone in his acceptance of others' control; statements that suggested they were at the mercy of society, particularly the college, peppered each participant's interview. It seems college structures, systems, and rules heighten the uncertain sense of agency felt by students considering withdrawal. Tristan's short extracts below demonstrate the lack of involvement he felt with his course, simultaneously suggesting the college's complete control over his time at college:

> *I get why we're in there, but I don't necessarily enjoy being in there*
>
> and
>
> *I get we've got to do it but I mean it doesn't just have to be us we could you could put in some something a lo little bit more interesting (Tristan)*

Tristan's statements demonstrate students' awareness of the formal requirements of education and how making curriculum changes can be challenging. Keen to show his appreciation for structure, he rejects any notion that he can be involved in how the course runs. Accepting the course as it is, despite his misgivings, he demonstrates how little involvement students have in course development and design and how this impacts his sense of agency. Rather than using his dissatisfaction to propel him forward and viewing it as a possible driver of change, Tristan accepts his role as 'student' and assumes that role is acted 'upon' rather than 'with'. For Tristan, a recent school-leaver, his low sense of agency is perhaps somewhat expected. Up until this point, Tristan has fallen in line with authority and systems through his compulsory schooling. The move to post-compulsory education brings possibilities, where students can select their preferred organisation, choose from a vast array of subjects, and apply for entry at various levels. With the freedom to make choices, it seems likely that students' sense of agency will grow. However, if agency is multi-dimensional and partially reliant on engagement with the present, the present must support agency development. If, in contrast, a student's current situation enforces rules and establishes hierarchies, that situation is unlikely to support agency development.

While college might seem an ideal opportunity to develop and foster individuals' sense of agency, interactions that lead to college courses should support this, especially when dealing with mature students whose agency has not recently been 'stifled' by compulsory education. However, Graham's extract below demonstrates how this is not always the case. Graham's earlier, difficult schooldays may have hampered his development of agency, and it seems that the past now influences his sense of agency as he attempts to engage with those supporting him both in the present and towards his future:

> *they were telling us likes of you need to learn the computers, kind of thing like eh, you ken, so I couldn't even copy and paste, I could maybe search something but likes of, even at that it, it kind of, predicts, you know what I mean? Eh, so I says "right I'll go and do computing" like kind of thing like eh, it'll keep them off my heed, you know what I mean? (Graham)*

It appears that achieving a sense of agency is not straightforward. Our early experiences, often of school, and our relationships with others function as reminders of previous challenges. When the outcome of those challenges includes a decreased sense of agency, it can take time to rebuild what was lost. Combining those past influences with current circumstances while looking towards the future, it may feel easier to accept help from others, even when that help is counterproductive; with little self-belief or sense of agency, individuals may be unlikely to trust their instinct. Graham's difficulties at school, where he considered himself segregated, continued to affect him later in life. Seeking advice regarding job prospects and learning opportunities from the local Job Centre, they encouraged him to learn about computers. Moving from school to employment, then unemployment had given Graham few opportunities to develop his sense of agency, so he accepted their direction with little regard for his interest or ability. Finally, Graham grasped the chance to satisfy Job Centre staff and applied to college. In doing so, however, he did not consider his past or future to be important in his decision. Instead, he focused purely on the present; the course offered, and the advice from those he saw as being above him in his societal hierarchy.

For some students, the opportunity to take control may be a step too far. With control comes responsibility, and this can be a daunting prospect. Moreover, individuals' sense of agency seems to impact their desire for control. While some participants were open to developing their agency and taking control of their lives, others demonstrated an unwillingness and unpreparedness for it. Like Graham, those participants preferred to accept instruction, even when those instructions reminded them of negative past experiences or contradicted their future aspirations. For example, Stuart, who repeatedly voiced his disappointment with his college, course, staff, and classmates, did not see the opportunity to define college rules as beneficial:

> *And the teacher looked at us like 'calm down'. I was like 'no'. I was like 'if that was us listening to books, on our mobile phones, playing music, when we're meant to be working we'd have been chucked out straight away, and I was like 'I'm no having it'. There's like choose what the rules are for us (Stuart)*

Following confusion over rules in a classroom, Stuart's immediate response to the potential relaxation of rules was one of discontent. Despite his earlier unhappiness at tutors enforcing rules, the imposition of rules was more comfortable than the confusion created by a lack of rules. While some students may have seen the benefit of inconsistencies and relaxed rules in certain

situations, Stuart's difficulty developing a sense of agency became clear. Relying on past experiences to bolster a sense of agency can be challenging, particularly when past experiences, such as those encountered by Graham and Stuart, have not lent themselves to agency development.

Participant	Extract	Page; line number
Adam	*I've got no choice*	6; 122
Alison	*I just sorta ended up staying*	8; 161
Andrew	*I'm just going the road that I see*	29; 616
Katie	*I would've just gave up*	6; 123
Rebecca	*spiralling out of control just, and you cannot grasp, hanging on*	20; 430
Sam	*it's like a…like a an omen*	14; 292
		n = 11

Figure 19 - Theme occurrences: An uncertain sense of agency

Attributing blame

Our sense of agency, with its reliance on our social circumstances, past experiences, present situation, and future orientation, varies over time and from person to person. Negative experiences function as blows to self-esteem. When our sense of agency is low, it seems we are less likely to accept full responsibility for our situations and actions. Participants' ways of dealing with negative experiences varied and are considered further in section 5.4 (Dealing with emotions). Their descriptions of what underlay some of those negative experiences or why they reacted in particular ways revealed unexpected similarities and an unconscious instinct to attribute blame. When their sense of agency is developing, they begin to accept responsibility by attributing blame to a part of themselves that they cannot yet fully control. The distance they place between 'them' and 'parts of them' acknowledges their growth while accepting their limits. The following extracts demonstrate how the participants reconciled self-blame with self-care, as they focused on their minds, brains, and 'angels'.

Attempting to reconcile her disparate thoughts, Rebecca described herself as being instructed by something out of her control. The familiar, if comic, effect of her *'angels'* demonstrates her inner conflict:

> *grinding my teeth to do it but I thought, 'well my health comes first before anything else, and it's not worth, getting yourself all worked up for this' but then you're thinking 'you've done so many years of, studying, I em but it was like your your wee angels, your good and the bad and it was just like "no do it, no do don't do it" {uh huh} and it was like no I had but it but as I say I had to I had to tell her how I was feeling, em, because she won't know (Rebecca)*

Rebecca's use of a comic description belies the difficulty the two angels caused. She shared her distress openly throughout the interview and the diametric voices she talks of, while a light-hearted way of demonstrating her thoughts, help clarify how torn she felt when faced with challenges. The notion of blame, for Rebecca, was not clear-cut. She distanced herself from her internal monologue, suggesting these *'angels'* were separate from her, and by doing so, she begins to reject blame. However, Rebecca does not suggest that she was devoid of blame; she saw the angels as hers and explained what *she* must do. Rather than letting the angels control her, which would enable her to blame them for her challenges, she attempted to share responsibility with them, as though aware that she was in control and needed support.

The inner conflict caused by academic persistence begins to emerge when we listen to students describing their situations. However, the realisation that further struggles lie ahead and the need for perseverance presents a challenge in itself. Like Rebecca, Katie demonstrates how, as difficulties intensify, it becomes easier to listen to 'others' than to oneself. However, when those others are part of oneself, the confusion intensifies:

> *It's just everything's eh looking like saying that I canae do it and mind's like, your mind's telling you to give up (Katie)*

As well as struggling with academic work, Katie's extract suggests she is battling against someone or something that is *'saying'* she cannot continue. There is, however, no person or thing that tells her this, and she is beginning to realise this. While we get the impression that Katie sees her mind as attempting to control her, another part of her is determined to persist. Katie distances herself from the part of herself that wants to withdraw, as though her 'real' self intends to remain. We see her struggling to quieten her mind as it threatens to force the rest of her to surrender.

Fighting an internal battle for the 'real' them to come through, it seems compartmentalising parts of oneself makes it easier to cope. While their sense of agency is developing, it takes time to reach the point where full responsibility for their thoughts and actions is acceptable. Perhaps, by avoiding full responsibility for their feelings, they can focus their attention on their studies, the part of their lives they seek to control. Sam's description, below, begins to reveal further complication when a part of herself begins to take such control that it tricks her and leaves her feeling ashamed:

I was already late and I didn't want to walk in to the class late and get total eyes on me from the tutor and everyone in the class, not when I don't even know any of them yet anyway…I know I should've just gone in but my brain was fuzz like fuzzing and making me think everyone would be looking at me and thinking 'check this fanny canae even get to class on time on the first day', so I just, oh God, I just went home. What an idiot I felt (Sam)

As her description conjures up the image of a shaken fizzy drink, we can imagine the uncontrollable nature of her brain. The pressure built up by a troubled journey to her first class meant she needed a release. Feeling unable to take the most appropriate action, to enter the class, Sam walked away. We cannot control what happens when we enter unfamiliar territory, but we know what to expect when turning away. Facing challenges or the unknown is daunting, as we do not know what will happen. Feeling unable to control new or difficult situations fully, it is perhaps unexpected that students often take the route of least resistance. For Sam, however, this option proved more challenging in the long run, as it led to further problems with a lack of integration:

So I basically sat on my own, tried, I tried to speak to some of the others but I wasn't really feeling it, you know? It was like they didn't need me and I was, I dunno, maybe I was in the way a bit, that's probably not what they were thinking but that's what I was thinking cos my brain's like telling me it's my own fault for being a tube and missing the first day (Sam)

While Sam accepts her mistake of not attending the first day of college, she struggles to stop her brain from taking over. Despite her lack of evidence regarding how her classmates regard her, she accepts her brain '*telling'* her they do not need her. While Sam revealed later in the interview that she was aware of her role in her challenges, it took time to reach this stage. By the end of her course, Sam's sense of agency had developed to such an extent that she could look back and explore her earlier thinking. At the time, however, she clung to the notion that her brain, not her, was responsible. When they establish a sense of agency, the earlier lack of agency can begin to cause distress. While Sam has moved on, she seems embarrassed and annoyed at her brain's control over her in the early days.

Graham further revealed the frustration caused by a perceived lack of control. While Sam felt her brain caused her to miss opportunities to make friends, Graham believed his brain caused him to read incorrectly:

the only way I can read is like say if I, say after I read a sentence, and I can't understand that sentence cos I, cos I've put a word in there, sometimes eh, eh my my brain'll predict it's that word, and it's not that word. I've got to read the sentence again and sometimes I've got to read it 6 or 7 times (Graham)

For Graham, who struggled with dyslexia, reading was difficult. He believed this was made more difficult by his brain, which seemed to 'trick' him. Frustrated, even angry about his reading difficulties, Graham made several comments about his brain. However, while reading was his foremost challenge, it appears not to be the primary source of anguish. Instead, Graham's challenge was coping with a brain he saw as faulty, one that tricked and made a fool of him. As a result, Graham has begun to lose faith in his brain, which he believes makes his life more difficult. Unlike the others, Graham's perceived inability to control his challenge is accurate, but the way he expresses his distaste is similar. Like the others, he attempts to distance himself from the part of him that causes him difficulty.

While our heads, minds and brains might be one, the participants spoke of all three in isolation. Of course, we might attribute this to differences in language, colloquialisms even. Still, their use of language in its various forms demonstrated their belief that it was often individual parts of themselves that controlled their whole self. While this caused upset and a dislike of that part of them, one participant had a very different take on the brain. Andrew used the brain to explain the various reactions that individuals have to situations:

> *So, not everyone who has learnt and done the same things up to that point will get the same result with the same method {uh huh} It determines on so many variables that…like, for instance, if two people get kicked in the shin on the same day, in the same way, one will react worse than the other because…that's, where their brain goes to at that point (Andrew)*

Andrew's description seems to accept rather than blame. He reminds us that individuals' sense of agency will vary and that much of this will depend on previous experiences and background. His final comment *'at that point'* suggests he sees the potential for change and that while he believes the brain is responsible, he also believes it is capable of and perhaps likely to change over time.

Most participants did not demonstrate an expectation that they, their brain, or their mind would change over time. Instead, they showed a negative view of these separate parts of themselves, struggling to see the link between parts of themselves and the 'real' them. It gave them a reason for their difficulties and permission to struggle, so they allowed these parts of themselves to be in control. The ability to separate these parts helped them compartmentalise their struggles, helping them deal with challenges while maintaining some focus on their studies.

Participant	Extract	Page; line number
Adam	*sort my myself, my head out*	6; 111
Alison	*my mind's still there*	26; 565
Stuart	*in my head it is allowed*	23; 489
Taylor	*obviously that wasn't my fault*	8; 152
Tristan	*the right, sort of mind for it*	12; 239
		n =10

Figure 20 - Theme occurrences: Attributing blame

Achieving agency

As we have seen, participants demonstrated varying degrees of agency. In this final section of the theme, we begin to see how agency development differs for individuals. While for some, there was a noticeable shift towards achieving a sense of agency in their lives and studies, others revealed such difficulty that they began to assert negative control over others. It seems experiences of persistence can alter individuals' perceptions of agency drastically and that these perceptions, in turn, affect how they demonstrate agency. Positive experiences help outweigh the negative and help students realise their sense of agency in academically and socially productive ways. However, if negative experiences outweigh the positives, the outcome is negative, with students clinging to any sense of agency they can, potentially turning against those they see as in authority. Near the ends of their courses, participants had reached different stages in their agency development, based on past experiences, current circumstances, and future projections. Their relationships with family, friends, the organisation, and society in general also played a significant part. Their experiences, circumstances, expectations, and relationships meant that from where they began to build their sense of agency varied. For those with disabilities, particularly those whose disabilities helped define them, their starting points were further back than those without disabilities or those who saw their disability as problematic but not 'them'. Continued challenges and complex relationships promoted poor outcomes for these students, as Stuart's extract demonstrates:

> *I'm just going to fail my whole entire course if I don't get the help. So I moaned and groaned for I think it was about 3 or 4 weeks at at learning support, non-stop and I was like "it's no happening, it's either I get the support, or I walk out and that. And this will look really bad for the college, otherwise"*
>
> and
>
> *Even though we're not meant to have our phones out in class, I'm going to take my phone out in front of teachers (Stuart)*

Throughout this section, I refer to 'boundaries', and it is worth clarifying at the outset what those 'boundaries' involve. As with any professional relationship, there are certain inferred boundaries

between staff and students; these include boundaries concerning power. Staff are inherently more 'powerful' than their students – a result of institutional discourses, disciplinary structures, and the position they hold as the person with superior knowledge. As becomes clear throughout this section, however, this power boundary can be shifted, and students can begin to assert authority over those they see as in 'power'.

Stuart, a mature student whose disabilities were both physical and learning-related, had a clear 'difference' from others. His disabilities often made learning particularly challenging, and he felt unable to comprehend or complete work the way others could. Feeling less able than others, he avoided taking any control over his actions within the college, seeing himself unable to control his studies in any way. Instead, Stuart turned his efforts against the organisation and its staff, attempting to exert power over tutors and support staff through ultimatums and rule breaches. His willingness to openly disobey staff and the demand he places on them demonstrates desperate attempts to control. However, he lacks understanding of how to initiate self-control and finds displaying challenging behaviour more fruitful and, perhaps, more comfortable. His past turbulent relationships with staff and his experiences of trying and failing have hindered any positive development of agency. Instead, he defiantly turns against staff, using their power boundaries against them to show his discontent both with the college and himself.

In contrast with Stuart, most participants revealed positive, if cautious, strides towards a sense of agency over the academic year. However, it seems the road to developing agency is unsettled and that there is no sudden or complete shift to 'having agency'. Instead, participants' descriptions reveal highs and lows on a complicated journey as they navigate and attempt to understand their role in their academic persistence. The participants whose extracts follow demonstrate the questioning and the ambiguity that comes from starting to 'achieve' agency. As they consider their lives and studies, they reveal the complex decisions they face that are embedded in their experiences and relationships:

> *I wasn't sure if I wanted to go but I think I did know even then that I'd go, I just wasn't ready to admit to people they'd been right the whole time [laughing]. But then, I think it's only me that can decide something like that cos it's me that's going to be the one doing it, you know? So…they were right, but so was I I think cos I was the one that decided when the time was right and that's the way it should be I think (Sam)*

Sam reveals the confusion she feels, even now, about her original decision to go to college. Still struggling to establish who was *'right'* in her decision to go to college, we see how relationships can help or hinder our sense of agency. Finally settling on the idea that both she and her former colleagues could simultaneously have been right, Sam seems both to believe and deny any sense

of control over her decision. Her uncertainty is shown through her tentative speech, in which she claims to *'think'* she was right on four occasions in this one short extract. Sam attempts to accept her role and to feel a sense of agency. Still, the relationships which led to her decision lessen her sense of agency as she cannot, at this stage, accept complete responsibility for the suggestions of others. There is no 'defining moment'. There is a slow, perhaps uncomfortable, shift towards achieving a sense of agency, but that growth is fuelled and slowed by experience and relationships. In Sam's case, the relationships were positive, yet they could negatively impact her sense of agency.

The desire not to allow others to exert control over us might originate from a negative relationship. Still, its ability to motivate and to help develop a desire for agency can be powerful. While we saw from Stuart's extract how negative relationships and experiences could promote negativity and encourage defiance in a harmful way, Alison's extract reveals a more effective response to unpleasant relationships. Alison's motivation to regain control of her life and studies came from the realisation that others were controlling her:

> *It felt it it, like, it's hard to explain. It made me feel like I was letting them win, like I was letting them get to me, and then I just decided it wasnae fair on me, because if I wanted to dae it I should be doing it, not letting any other people dictate my life, ken? (Alison)*

Alison's awareness of what was happening did not 'give' her a sense of agency; it gave her motivation and a desire for agency. The consequence of negative relationships can be positive; they drive us towards a sense of agency. As a young woman with family responsibilities and self-awareness that allows her to see her potential, Alison's starting point for agency development differs from Stuart's. Alison has completed previous studies, does not have physical or learning difficulties, and family and college staff know her strength and resilience. However, before Alison can begin to achieve a renewed sense of agency, she has had to recognise the control she has given away. From Alison's extract, we see that she has begun to accept that, as she suggests that she has been *'letting…other people dictate'*. This gradual shift in Alison's awareness and a growing sense of self-worth has enabled her to take steps to achieve her sense of agency. Still, the negative relationships that supported the breakdown of her agency were equally crucial in its reinforcement.

Unlike most other participants, Andrew never explicitly talked about feeling out of control. However, his description of navigating life and encountering negative relationships revealed a similar experience to Alison:

> *if you feel like…that group of people that you're doing the course with or that course isn't for you, always find more to learn and more to, see into, like…think of each*

> *turning point of your life as a door. You open it, find out, find what you need to find, sometimes you walk through that door, sometimes you just close that door, find another. Find another until the room that's, sitting in front of you is what you need to find or is what you've been looking for (Andrew)*

Like Alison, Andrew is beginning to embrace difficulties as positive, accepting their role in strengthening character. His trepidatious description of his approach to life suggests caution mixed with opportunity. Sensing he does not yet have complete control over his life, he cautiously accepts that only he can open those doors, each of which will bring him closer to a stronger sense of agency.

For some participants, agency had developed so significantly that we begin to see its benefit and the relief it brought. The 'speed' at which individuals achieve agency is immeasurable, as it relies on many factors. However, it may be that agency development is quicker and more pronounced for mature students. With successful careers and positive relationships behind them, their starting point is further forward, and their relief at reinstating their sense of agency is evident. Both Adam and Rebecca were mature students with successful careers behind them. Their reasons for leaving their careers were different, but they had a similar solid foundation of success on which to build. Both had also previously completed courses at lower levels, with their most recent struggles due to strained college staff relationships. Adam demonstrated his first real gain when he completed and passed a difficult assignment:

> *I thought…"fuck it I can just jack I'll just jack this in"…but I let but after a few days…I seen the same tutor…and I…had been* looking *at the paper and I, started to understand it, and I I sort of looked and thought "you know what? Fuck you, I'm gonna do it" {uh huh}, so I persevered and, passed that I passed that assessment (Adam)*

The difficulties Adam had encountered, particularly relating to his relationship with a staff member, had been impactful. He no longer wanted to continue studying, fearing he did not have the academic ability to complete. At this stage, Adam's sense of agency reduced to the point he felt he could not continue. However, upon making one final attempt, when he began to understand the assignment independently, his courage grew and helped him see his potential. While, like Alison, he demonstrates defiance in doing this by wanting to prove others wrong, the final knock to his confidence from a tutor may have been a turning point in Adam's studies. Reaching his lowest point at that time, Adam felt he had nothing more to lose by striving to achieve the unit. The sense of achievement he gained resulted from him taking control of a situation that he may have avoided in the past. For mature students like Adam and Rebecca, it seems there is the memory of being in control and a feeling of 'nothing left to lose' that encourages one final push to regain a sense of control:

I just thought, cos of the time I thought you've only got, then it was like you only had…two two months, a month and a half to go, a month and a half to go of, just, of fin of just to finish this course, that's all you've got to do, that's all you've got to do, just, you've plodded along for so many months, with this…come on, just get your arse together, and just get on with it (Rebecca)

Having felt utterly out of control at some points during her course, Rebecca attempts to regain control by telling herself that this is what she must do. Rather than seeing her difficulties as something she cannot overcome and seeing the end in sight, she begins to believe she can complete her course and get herself over the finishing line, given an extra push on her part. Rebecca did not just begin to take control at this point; her sense of agency helped her to continue, but she began blaming herself for her struggles thus far. Alluding to a previous lack of effort, she believes she can increase effort and succeed despite potential difficulties. It seems Rebecca believes she has not tried hard enough in the past. However, her ability to see the end helped her reassess the situation and her need for control, subsequently changing her attitude towards her ability.

A sense of agency may be easier to develop when individuals' pasts were positive, they previously knew a sense of agency, and they had supportive relationships. The memory of feeling in control with a sense of purpose and clear plans, combined with people encouraging and helping is undoubtedly helpful in overcoming challenges. It reinforces what is positive and helps dispel negativity. It seems, however, that even in the most challenging circumstances, our younger students can draw upon negative past experiences and challenging relationships to develop a sense of agency and protect their future, as Taylor's extracts reveal:

if you want to do something with your life and if like you want to do filming or stuff like that, move to a location that you'll get noticed, and then do a lot of filming and work hard on that like

and

I'm not going to lie I was a bit immature when I first like first started college and it's just made me realise like, you can do what you want to do, if that makes any sense? (Taylor)

Taylor had a difficult upbringing and complex personal circumstances which could have challenged his entire future. For many young people in situations like Taylor's, the future is often uncertain and insecure. Taylor, however, was upbeat, regardless of the challenges he faced. Unconvinced that his future is mapped out already, Taylor demonstrates a sense of agency often unseen in young students; he wants to take control and accept responsibility without letting others halt his progress. Happy to accept life as complicated, Taylor demonstrates an understanding that

only he can make his life choices and that he must uncover his potential. In a later comment, Taylor alludes to life as a journey over which he must take control:

I can always choose to bring the story back on the way that I leave (Taylor)

In his comment above, Taylor's explicit meaning was in terms of writing fiction. A novice author, he described his writing process and the genres of stories he writes. During his description, Taylor spoke of developing storylines and creating exciting and unexpected endings, but the interview led me to believe Taylor's comment may have hidden deeper meaning. His seemingly innocuous comment encouraged me to reflect on Taylor's experiences, and I concluded that beneath the surface lay a determination to rewrite his future, regardless of his past. Taylor's experiences were unusual, and most adults would have struggled to cope. As a young person, the trauma he experienced will undoubtedly have seriously impacted him. However, Taylor refuses to allow others' acts to determine his future. In doing so, he reminds us that even when we cannot remember successes, when our experiences are harmful, and our relationships have been challenging, it is not impossible to develop a strong sense of agency.

Participant	Extract	Page; line number
Chris	*you're there to educate yourself, to improve your own life*	31; 667
Tristan	*if I just stick it out*	37; 797
		n = 9

Figure 21 - Theme occurrences: Achieving agency

Summary

This theme revealed the uncertainty of the participants' sense of agency throughout their persistence journey. In general, their sense of agency changed and grew over their time at college, but their earlier experiences were significant in its development. Their college experiences and relationships with family, friends, and college staff helped and hindered agency development. The participants demonstrated the complex role of others, revealing that even positive relationships could have adverse effects and vice versa. While a sense of agency might benefit academic persistence, they showed that no 'recipe' for its enhancement exists. Instead, relationships, experiences, and time combine to create the agency students show. Often unsure of who was responsible for their actions, participants revealed how malleable it is and the importance of that malleability.

5.4 'What am I doing here?' Emotions and coping while considering withdrawal

Introduction

Participants shared times of upset and hurt mixed with the joy of overcoming hurdles and their relief of nearing the end of their courses. They revealed emotions that they had not shared with others as they described their struggles to navigate challenging aspects of their courses. The most compelling descriptions were filled with emotion and centred around disorientation and insignificance. While every experience was unique, the underlying emotions they attached to their experiences showed similarities. This final theme illuminates the participants' emotional journeys, highlighting how lost and isolated they felt at times, their reluctance to believe that they mattered, and how they dealt with their emotional challenges.

Lost and confused

Following some time in rehabilitation, Adam had opted to return to college. College courses attract students from all walks of life and beginning a course can be daunting. For mature students, whose previous engagement with education may have been several years ago, the journey is uncertain. In those cases, it seems that navigating college is particularly challenging. Adam's extract reveals feelings of being lost and confused which centred not only around college but also around the world itself:

> *So the world had turned upside-down, nothing was the same as what I remembered it. So coming into the educational environment pff it was just like starting high school all over again…{yeah}…so it was quite daunting at the start (Adam)*

Attempting to find his feet in what he saw as a changing world while also negotiating his new college environment left Adam feeling daunted and unsure. Adam's lasting memory of education was high school, and without any alternative, he drew comparisons in his mind. While he does not elaborate on his high school experiences, his words from later in the interview, *'I just thought I was stupid,'* suggest his schooldays may have been challenging. However, Adam tries to connect his uncertain journey ahead with anything he can; it seems that to embark on what is familiar is preferred to the unknown, even if what is familiar is uncomfortable. This unknown world might seem extreme, yet Graham's extract reveals a similar experience. Another mature student with challenging school days behind him, Graham finds himself lost in another world where he cannot understand the language:

> *And that's feel really, you just feel so frustrated, but like ken, and honest to God I've…my jobs have been labouring jobs all my life because of my dyslexic like kind of thing eh? I can I can count, eh eh I can multiply all that like kind of thing, but, when it comes to words, it's like another lang, it's like another world, right? (Graham)*

As Graham describes his attempts to understand the terms tutors ask him to read and comprehend, the challenges are unlike what he has experienced during his employment. Having spent years doing manual labour, Graham has not needed advanced literacy skills, and now, faced with academic work, he feels lost. Graham is now not only lost in the subject's difficulty; he feels lost in another world where nobody speaks the same language as he does. The language adds to the feeling of being lost, as even in a country where he should be familiar, Graham cannot ask for directions or help. Later in his interview, Graham suggests he is no longer only lost in an unknown world; he is now lost and unable to see, as he reveals nothing makes *'a blind bit of sense'*. For Graham, it does not matter how much he tries to navigate his way through college, his disability blinds him, and nothing will enable him to see clearly. These extracts reveal students who feel isolated and vulnerable. Removed from their comfort zones, where their worlds and those in them are familiar, they have stepped into the unknown where they do not yet have a sense of belonging. Instead, not knowing the college's landscape and language distances them from others who study with them but apart from them. As students who are different, whether due to mature status or disability, they have become automatic 'outsiders':

> *Yeah em, with not getting the support em, from [the college] when I studied up in [the college], that was, that was, that was, that was horrible [shaking her head] that was, yeah em yeah the the it was yeah, I felt…alienated to be honest with you, I I…it was worse than em, I felt like I was back at high school (Rebecca)*

When Rebecca's college failed to provide the support she needed, she felt abandoned. Describing the experience as *'horrible'*, she seems unable to find words to explain how difficult a time this had been. Shaking her head as she relayed the story, it was as though she was trying to shake off the memories that remained. She suggests a feeling of being somehow less than human and possibly worth less than the other students on her course. These feelings of isolation and being worth less than others served to remind her of similar feelings of her high school experience when she had suffered bullying.

These feelings of being alone and lost are not always immediate. For some participants, the stress and confusion they felt during their course led to them losing their direction and struggling to see a way forward. For those students, the sense of being lost does not come alone. For example, Rebecca's sense of being lost and confused stems from stress, but the impact of these feelings is not merely upset. As a mature student with a long career behind her, Rebecca feels she has lost

control of her journey. For someone used to taking control, this is an unnatural and worrying feeling for her:

> *I've I feel things going out of control like em…when you get stressed and you just have a blank, you can't do any work because you don't know what you're doing, you don't know what direction you're going to go into (Rebecca)*

Finding coursework challenging to understand left her struggling to manage her stress level, which impacted her ability to see clearly. She talks of *'hav[ing] a blank'*, like the feeling some might have in a stressful exam situation, where minds suddenly seem empty, and no previous knowledge is forthcoming. The impact of this *'blank'* results in Rebecca feeling unable to continue and entirely at a loss, where she begins to question her ability to ever get to her academic destination. Like Graham, we sense Rebecca is blinded by her struggle, as though whichever way she turns is wrong. Again, it seems Rebecca is entirely alone, struggling to find her direction without anyone to turn to, and we sense she feels caught in a trap with no apparent way out.

The sense of being lost does not stop with confusion and stress; it raises the question *'what am I doing here?*'. Sam seems surprised at her persistence, as though she has somehow navigated her journey through college with very little thought. For someone who struggles so intently with a lack of friendships within the college, Sam's persistence appears to belie her lack of belonging:

> *I don't even know how I've got to this far at college now cos it really…it it hasn't been fun…well some bits have but most of the time I've just felt a bit like what am I doing here? It's not the work, I enjoy the work most of the time, if I go to classes, but it's hard not really having a group you can talk to that's doing the same work as you (Sam)*

For Sam, who has felt little connection with her classmates and staff, her only contact with college is physical. With no relationship between her and others, she cannot rely on motivation from friendships formed during her course, and she begins to question her intentions. Relationships, connections, and support from others might help carry some students through college, but Sam has relied on herself. Only now, towards the end of the year, does she begin to realise how unlikely it was that she should persist, as she appears to have navigated through dark days and a complex landscape. Her lack of connection with others has meant a journey tackled alone, and her isolation has left her feeling bewildered and lost. Even the physical act of attending college has left Sam confused, as she contemplates how she has managed:

> *I was like 'nah, I think tomorrow I'll just not go and then maybe I'll find out how to leave, like proper, like official like'. But then next day I was in class and that before I even realised it…that sounds mad cos obviously I've had to, you know, I've had to get there, and get up and get ready and get to actually get to college, but yeah, I was just like there, before I know what's even happening (Sam)*

On autopilot, Sam has managed to attend class with no prior thought applied to her attendance. While rational thought and consideration of the situation might encourage students to seek help and improve their circumstances, it seems that for some, avoidance of thinking can also be helpful at times. It may be that, when students are considering withdrawal, physically going through the motions of persisting could be beneficial. Despite a lack of personal connections, attending maintains the physical connection with the institution, the course, and the people. This physical connection might be enough, at times, to initiate a sense of connectedness.

Rebecca also seems to have been somewhat unaware of how she has managed to get as far as she has done on the course:

> *[Big inhale] Em, it feels like, what the hell happened? Know what I mean? {laughing} What the hell happened? Eh, what's, yeah it's just like "what happened to that blip?" It's just…honestly it was like the darkest days it's like like I've suffered depression a few times and that was, as I say, that was out of control, that was like I I'm not feeling in control of myself, em, as I say everything almost everything when when you're suffering through stress everything just, everything's a is bad (Rebecca)*

As though she has blindly navigated her course, Rebecca cannot grasp how, amidst her difficulties, she has successfully achieved the outcomes she has. She questions what happened over the year and suddenly puts her challenges down to a *'blip'*. Her words reveal an inability to believe what happened, as though Rebecca is entirely unaware of how she coped. We sense she has suddenly managed to break through her challenges, as though emerging from the darkness. However, in her following sentence, Rebecca describes her difficult times as her '*darkest days'*. Her description of those same days as a *'blip'* contradicts the intensity of her feelings at the time. It seems that looking back on a traumatic time lets us see our experiences in a brighter light.

When students are struggling to persist, they can begin to feel lost. This feeling can then lead them to question whether they should remain in this place of isolation, confusion, and emotional distress when they could instead leave and return to a place of safety and comfort. For some, the question is not whether they should remain. The question is whether they should ever have been there in the first place. Stuart's extract, below, reveals a tentative exploration of whether he should leave this unfamiliar place in which he feels simultaneously lost and utterly confused:

> *she said "right you have to do the paragraph now", and I was like "well you just told me that I wasn't to do that"…and I don't know if it's me, cos I'm taking it in that I'm meant to do it, and I've not to do it, and then I've to do it, that I could do it in my own words and I was like "am I actually meant to be here at all?" It's like, it's like me saying "right you should be doing football today", going and playing at this game and then going out at the same time and playing another game of hockey and playing basketball and at the same time (Stuart)*

Whether ambiguous instructions created Stuart's confusion is unclear. However, the confusion he felt, and his perceived lack of clarity created a sense of unease in his surroundings as he began to feel lost. His words suggest he is questioning his understanding, but we can sense he is unsure if he hears the same as others. Like Adam and Graham, we start to wonder if Stuart has found himself in a world where the language is different, a place that is not meant for him. Rather than finding clarity in staff instructions, Stuart feels he is dealing with mixed messages as he attempts to juggle tasks and make sense of the confusion as a way of reaching his destination.

While some participants struggled with the confusion and feelings of being lost, Andrew appeared to welcome the idea of navigating situations on his own, without fear of becoming lost:

> *And yeah, people get lost but, life is always about, finding your way, and if you don't find your way, how can you actually say that you've reached your goal, like for instance, a GPS tracker in a maze. Yes you'll get to where you need to be but you'll have no accomplishment of getting there. You'll have arrived at your destination but you'll have, no actual experience of what it's like to get there. You'll just arrive there and 'oh look, that's it done' (Andrew)*

Andrew compares the idea of an unclear journey through college and towards his future career to a journey through a maze to demonstrate how his potential success at college would bring a greater sense of achievement should he complete his course without support. His belief that becoming lost is part of the journey shows dedication and commitment to his course despite, or possibly enhanced by, the difficulties he faces along the way.

When students are struggling, no matter the reason, their journey becomes increasingly emotional. When they begin to perceive their challenges as too complex to navigate, a sense of disorientation ensues. For some, this may be a short glitch in an otherwise steady journey, but the confusion will continue and grow for others. As they sense they are lost with a subject, course, within the institution or the world, the distress can be such that they begin to question their existence in that place.

Participant	Extract	Page; line number
Alison	*lost without Jennifer*	36; 776
Chris	*have I actually picked the right course*	32; 679
Katie	*I've no got a clue what I'm doing*	14; 297
Taylor	*I want to find my own feet*	9; 172
Tristan	*I've got not the foggiest clue*	13; 268
		n = 11

Figure 22 - Theme occurrences: Lost and confused

Mattering

Students do not always find it easy to 'slot in' to college. A new organisation with a sea of fresh faces and a selection of new subjects can leave them feeling disorientated and confused. Their sense of self-worth can quickly become important as they try to establish their part within the organisation. While students might seldom consider themselves particularly important to the college, at this point, neither do they consider themselves unimportant. To them, they are part of the new intake of students, no more or less critical. However, when difficulties arise, and they begin to demonstrate persistence, the difference between them and others and their sense of importance, or lack thereof, becomes heightened. Participants' sense of importance, whether positive or negative, appears linked to their past experiences. Experience helps build and shape confidence for some; for others, the opposite is true. Schooldays, jobs, and relationships can impact college expectations, but previous college experiences have an understandably direct effect.

Chris, whose earlier attempts at a college had resulted in withdrawal, described his surprise at the college's reaction to his attempt to withdraw on his first day:

> *They didn't when I left, they didn't ask why they just weren't bothered, I didn't even receive anything from any kind of lecturers when I told them I had left there was no response whatsoever f and that was me being in within that course for about two or three months, but when it came to this college, this college wanted to know there and then and I had technically I hadn't even started the car the the the class yet*
>
> and
>
> *I think that, the college has done, done what all they could have done, eh I wasn't actually expecting them to do anything, I just thought they'd say that's fine see you later. And because I thought once the because, I thought it would have been sort of bums on seats sort of thing, if one goes out they've got a list of people that don't people who don't turn up that's their sort of waiting list if that's the right word? Reserve list? {yeah} And I didn't think they'd be that bothered but, I think the college did more than what I was expecting them to do…so I can't I can't fault them with that (Chris)*

Chris sought help immediately upon entering the college. Expecting the college to accept his withdrawal, he was surprised when they urged him to stay. Drawing on his earlier experience, when Chris withdrew no questions asked, his expectation was similar. Chris demonstrates in both extracts how he believed the college should and would act, based on his experience and the judgment it led him to make. Chris did not yet see himself as part of the college; he was not 'theirs', and he was not yet significant. He saw himself as a name on a list, a replaceable technicality. Chris reveals some fictional timestamp, as though the start of a class transforms a

selection of individuals in whom the college has little interest into a structured group of students who are suddenly part of the organisation. What creates this belief is unclear, and we are left wondering whether previous experience has misinformed him or if it has impacted his self-worth to such a degree that he can no longer believe he would matter.

When students have had negative college experiences, they might arrive with low expectations and a sense of insignificance. When positive experiences contradict those expectations, and when students see the extent to which they matter, their sense of self-worth and belonging begins to change. For students whose experiences have been positive, however, the situation can be reversed. Accustomed to being part of something, whether a previous college, workplace, or family, a negative experience that undermines their significance can raise questions and cause upset that is difficult to overcome. Both Rebecca and Adam shared their feelings of insignificance, revealing the upset caused by administrative errors:

> *they says that I slipped through their net, em, yeah hardly, em, yeah that was, the lack of…lack of interest in their students actually, compared to where I was studying before, that it was just, they were so passionate about it and, about what what they they do (Rebecca)*
>
> and
>
> *I felt, forgotten about…{Oh right ok} as a result of the wee altercation em…I wasn't allowed to, because of [removed for confidentiality], that was decided by [another department], and I had to go through a whole a whole process with [the other department]…and…because I couldn't do that, on a Friday I was turning up for three hours of IT and then having to wait on the bus, the coach at quart that left at quarter to five because, nothing, had been set up for me (Adam)*

Rebecca's previous experience was so positive that she was distraught when her new college did not meet her expectations. Informed that she had *'slipped through their net',* she immediately questioned their care towards their students. Her previous support had built her confidence, while the current offering tore it down and threatened her belief that she mattered. While Rebecca suggests that she finds their comment unbelievable, she also questions their motive. Her sense of importance is not yet completely gone, and a trace of what her previous experience helped build remains, as she states the problem is 'them' and their *'lack of interest'* and not her insignificance.

Adam spoke less of his previous educational experiences, but his recent experience was similar to Rebecca's. However, without the buffer of previous positivity, it seems Adam started from a lower point than Rebecca. For Adam, his feeling of insignificance came from being '*forgotten'*. Agreeing not to participate in a session on health grounds was far from what Adam had wanted,

but he accepted the decision and awaited instructions. As a result of an administrative error, tutors did not include Adam in any activity. His description of feeling '*forgotten'* highlighted how he felt '*overlooked'* and unimportant in the college's organisational structure. When asked to describe his feelings in more detail, Adam stated:

> *Ah, it's just, I felt…pff…of no value…cos, basically tot I felt totally overlooked, and…I didn't matter, like I didn't matter, that was the sh long and short of it…doesnae matter (Adam)*

Adam was visibly upset about the situation and how the college had dealt with it, but his description of his feelings reveals more. Talking first of his feelings of being *'overlooked'* and valueless, he projects his feelings on the college. From there, Adam seems to begin to believe that he was unimportant, as he states, *'I didn't matter'*. Adam appears tired, as though this is something he has spent too long considering, and we sense that he may have had many discussions with college staff about the situation. In his final mention of this, Adam takes a step back and talks of how *'[something] doesnae matter'*. It is unclear whether Adam is now stating that the situation does not matter or if he is now referring to himself in the third person. Still, it seems he no longer wants to think about the experience as it causes upset and further reduces his sense of self-worth. Adam seems to accept his perceived insignificance more readily than Rebecca. Unlike her, he cannot draw on his previous positive experience to help him bounce back and regain a belief that he matters.

Chris, Rebecca, and Adam had strong opinions on their importance to the college, but this is not always the case. They based their opinions on specific interactions, and those interactions shaped their perception. Up until that point, it seems students are curious. They are unsure of their importance and cannot work out what the college staff are thinking. It causes confusion and contradiction as students attempt to hide in plain sight. Sam's focus throughout the interview shifted from describing her attempts to remain unseen to later when she openly resented that nobody had noticed her struggle. Her early comments suggest someone who is actively trying to remain unnoticed, as though this is helpful to her persistence:

> *I think I probably go to enough classes that I'm sort of under the what's it called ray? [radar?] Like under the radar?*
>
> and
>
> *I don't like asking for help if I've missed class cos then it's like you're, you're almost pointing out you've missed the class and really…you're kind of hoping they've not really noticed so, so I'll try and find other ways of getting the stuff so it's not as obvious you know? (Sam)*

while her subsequent comment, below, highlights insecurity in her invisibility:

you're crying out for help at college and it's like no-one does anything, like no-one notices…you're not like asking for much, but if they'd, yeah, if they'd just notice (Sam)

From attempting to keep her absenteeism hidden to her claim that she has been actively seeking help, Sam's contradiction highlights the complex nature of emotions and mattering relating to persistence. While Sam can see that she has hidden her need for support from those who could provide that support, she seems to believe that she has voiced her need for support. Sam's '*crying out for help'* has not been literal; she has hidden her cries yet wonders why nobody has heard them. Further on in the interview, Sam makes comments that could reveal more about how she feels about her perceived lack of support:

I don't really let on if I'm needing something, they probably don't even really know do they? [laughing] Teachers are supposed to know everything though aren't they? So maybe they do know…maybe they just know I'll be ok

and

because I've been ok and not needed help I've just been I've managed to dodge any questions and no-one's really even noticed that I've been struggling, like not struggling with the work but with like having my own worries and thinking I'd just leave (Sam)

Sam's suggestion that teachers *'know everything'*, while said with an air of flippancy, suggests that she has relied on staff's hyper-awareness of students. She is so unsure of her claim that she questions and argues with herself, as though she is attempting to reason and determine the truth. Sam knows that she has hidden her difficulties and feelings, yet she questions why nobody has noticed. It seems that, while students may want to access support, they feel a need to protect themselves against others noticing their weaknesses. However, they can begin to lose their sense of self-worth as they withdraw from others to conceal weakness but inadvertently conceal themselves.

As the participants described the extent to which they believed they did or did not matter to the college, they also attempted to assign blame. When students still retain a sense of importance and self-worth, it seems they associate blame with the college:

there is no excuse…em, I think it was just it was just, they were, shrugging you off to be honest with you, em, and that was a lame, lame thing to say you've slipped through the net, which basically they weren't doing their job in the first place (Rebecca)

While the college appears to have taken responsibility for their error by admitting she *'slipped through their net'*, this has done little, if anything, to alleviate Rebecca's negative feelings

towards them. She regards this as an excuse and suggests that their 'mistake' was deliberate. It is impossible to say whether Rebecca bases her assertion on fact or merely reacts to a difficult situation. However, her perception and what it reveals is valuable. Rebecca's distress makes it significant and not something to be 'brushed off' as a mistake. In admitting their mistake, the college minimised its importance. This mistake has left her feeling unimportant; if an administration error results in missed students, students are little more than 'paperwork'.

Unlike Rebecca, Adam was less inclined to blame the college for their oversight. Instead, accepting that he is *'one guy'*, Adam reminds us that he has lost his sense of importance over time. He no longer considers himself important to any staff and now assumes that he fades into the background with everyone else:

> *They should have had better communication…em…but there would have been nothing…maybe they could have noticed that I was depressed but…[laughs] th they're seeing so many students every day that one, one guy, one guy without no smiling I mean wasnae as if I walking about with my face tripping me {uh huh}, I just wasnae smiling (Adam)*

Adam attempts to blame the college, suggesting that their communication was poor, but he seems unsure how this would have helped. No longer feeling important to the college, Adam has stopped feeling important to himself. He dismisses his feelings, both through his laughter at his depression and how he quickly provides a reason for staff not noticing his feelings. What began as an administrative error has grown over the year to demonstrate to Adam how insignificant he is to the college. While a student with positive previous college experiences may overcome this, the negativity is easier to accept for those whose education has been a constant challenge.

Participant	Extract	Page; line number
Alison	*if they actually like listened*	25;529
Andrew	*won't have taken particular note of it*	32; 690
Graham	*I get kind of you [gesturing brush off]*	16; 332
Katie	*sorted out the support earlier…cos at the start we didn't know who we were getting*	19; 401
Stuart	*they left it for about 4 to 6 weeks*	18; 382
Taylor	*the college could have…offer support and guidance*	20; 558
Tristan	*They've got better things to do not to deal with my problems*	20; 419
		n = 11

Figure 23 - Theme occurrences: Mattering

Dealing with emotions

Emotions have various manifestations, as individuals cope and deal with challenges differently. Academic persistence, like any other challenge, sees emotional responses that vary depending on experience and personality. While some choose to hide their feelings, preferring others not to notice them for fear of repercussion or embarrassment, others struggle to contain their frustration and anger. The extracts in this final sub-theme focus on the male participants. The females expressed their emotions during the interviews, but unlike the males, their responses were consistent; they typically sought help from friends, family, and staff. Thus, it seems that while our male students strive to persist in college, they may have a greater struggle in terms of emotion and how to cope.

There can be a reluctance to show emotion, and the following extracts from Adam provide some insight into the hidden emotions of persistence and from where it originates:

> *I've got a constant fog…and, trying to absorb the information, I only take bits of it so I mean I have to sit go over it again and again {uh huh}, and I eventually will take it in, but, it's the amount of times that I've got to go over it…[Sigh] It it's painful to use, em…that's something that I dinae…I try not to show, {yeah} the class that, I'm hurting, I'll do my best not to show it…to my knowledge, none of them have noticed (Adam)*

Adam is in constant pain due to an injury sustained in his previous career, and the explicit meaning of his *'hurting'* is his physical pain. Over and above his physical pain, however, is his untold emotional pain of struggling in college. Deeply unhappy at points, Adam has continuously hidden his emotions. Just as he does not want to show his physical pain, he has no desire to let others see his feelings. Adam first states that he hides his pain due to his upbringing, but he seems unsure. We are left uncertain of where his beliefs come from, but it is clear that they impact his ability to ask for help:

> *I I've ne I've never asked {yeah} that's my problem em asking asking for help {uh huh} I find hard, simply because of my upbringing……To ask for help is weak … I learnt that the hard way, asking for help…it's I sh I should be able to do the these tasks {uh huh}…and that's the way, that's basically the way I see it (Adam)*

It appears that even when students can see the benefit of asking for help, taking the plunge is difficult. What we might see as a straightforward request can have deep underlying feelings attached. Adam knows he should ask for help and that help is there when he asks, but he has learned from his upbringing and earlier experiences that he should not ask for help. He believes he should be able to cope independently, but those beliefs must stem from somewhere. We sense that he compares himself to others and bases his capability on others rather than himself. It seems

that students are self-punishing, as though they believe that having difficulties is weak and that showing them reveals that weakness. Much like their sense of importance, previous negative experiences do not help alter this opinion. Accepting his difficulties and feeling unhappy about his college experiences, Adam attempts to push his emotions aside. Becoming despondent towards his course and tutors, he tries to forget how unhappy he has become, believing he is not worthy of support, answers, or care. Instead, he takes what happens, no longer rebuts opinion, and accepts, *'you've just got to roll you just roll with it'*.

Accepting college support is not always easy for students. When the support need arises from a challenge created out with college, the support can seem unnecessarily invasive. When personal challenges impact college and threaten students' persistence, it is often college staff who first notice and intervene to offer support. However, staff intervention is not always needed or wanted. Like Adam, Taylor found his way of coping with his stressful situation by turning down offers of support or accessing minimal support:

> *They have advised me to go to like guidance and stuff like that … but I chose, maybe just to have like one or two sessions, I didn't think it would help me and I think, cos I'm more of a like I'm not a private person but like, I deal with it myself and just, do what I want to do not what other people want me to do (Taylor)*

The challenges Taylor faced were uniquely personal. Following a traumatic family incident, he withdrew from college, repeating his studies the following year. His struggles with persistence straddled personal and academic circumstances; personal circumstances made him repeat, but the repeat led to boredom and unhappiness. When the college offered him guidance, Taylor saw it as an unnecessary invasion of privacy. He did not want to discuss what had happened the previous year as though it underlay his unhappiness in college. During our interview, Taylor openly shared his experiences, even permitting me to publish them within the study. This openness contradicts his unwillingness to accept support and guidance from the college but offers insight into how students perceive offers of help. During our interview, Taylor was in control of his disclosure. I was an outsider asking him to support my study, and I arrived with little knowledge of him, his circumstances, or his feelings. College staff could not offer the same; they knew him and his situation, and they had links to his studies. This connection, it seems, may have made open discussion and accepting support difficult for Taylor, as he wanted to break free of the reputation and expectations brought on by his experiences. Wanting to appear strong and emotionally unfazed by recent events, Taylor avoided staff involvement. While few students will experience situations like Taylor's, many will face their own unique and equally challenging problems. While offering support will always be crucial, it appears that students may struggle to accept help from someone attached to their studies and will instead attempt to hide their feelings from us.

Unlike Adam and Taylor, Graham's difficulties were purely academic. He described feeling *'exhausted'* and *'frustrated'* on many occasions and seemed to accept support for his studies willingly. His dyslexia often created the difficulties he faced when completing academic work, and upon feeling tired and confused with his learning difficulty, he would turn to the support staff. However, while Graham accepted support and appeared to rely on it heavily, this further impacted how he felt about the organisation, staff, and himself:

> *It's kind of you can do it like and you and you get so frustrated because they're saying, and you're going "but but I find it really hard" like but "you can do it" like kind of thing ok? And then they're, and then they get frustrated with you, so they go "give me it here"…you know what I mean? And you and you go "thanks", because y y and you feel obligated to say thanks because they're helping you and and and you shouldn't be saying that, you shouldn't be feeling that way*
>
> and
>
> *I I've got told I have improve…you know? I don't feel like I have because, I feel like eh other people are doing it for me (Graham)*

Graham feels he has no option but to accept the support he is given and feels guilty for not feeling grateful. He thanks the staff because he believes this is the 'right' thing to do, but this exacerbates the problem. Graham seems less annoyed with the situation he perceives regarding the support mechanisms and more annoyed at how it made him feel about himself. It appears that for students who rely on support, the support itself can be frustrating. The more support Graham accepts, the less he feels his work is his own. Staff efforts to help him have resulted in Graham feeling ungrateful and resentful as he believes that they have taken control and that he can no longer demonstrate his ability. In turning this around on himself, Graham suggests that it is himself at fault. Writing his feelings off as him having *'a bad day'* suggests he no longer feels any control over his experiences and believes his feelings to be unimportant.

The more negativity the participants experienced within the college, the more pronounced their feelings and responses became. However, even when pushed to the limits of his emotions, Adam struggled to respond:

> *Like my heart, my heart missed like I just felt physically sick because I was caught in between, fight or flight…it was either…go forward and* smash*…and lose your place in college, or…say say just say nothing…and…I just said nothing (Adam)*

Adam reveals a physical sense of losing control, trapped by his situation. His instincts kicked in, but not knowing where to turn left Adam feeling vulnerable and overwhelmed, and those feelings left him considering what he saw as his only two options. While neither option might have been in his best interests, Adam opted to keep his college place, regardless of the impact it might have

on him. In this time of difficulty, Adam saw only two extreme solutions, taking complete control and going against the college's demands or relinquishing control. We are left wondering why he believed those were the only options available, whether he had considered but disregarded any alternatives, or if the situation had created such intense feelings that he was unable to see any other options. Adam's overwhelming emotion may have begun as anger, but the response he describes reveals anxiety and stress. As emotions run high, we can see how confused they can become, as what begins as one emotion transforms quickly into another. It appears that, in demonstrating academic persistence, students will face unexpected emotions and deal with them in unlikely ways.

Graham also described anger, but his anger slowly rose to the surface, revealing fragility:

> *sometimes you're feeling boiling up and t [shaking his head], right? But you know what I mean? So you, I keep it cool, cos I can keep a good level cool head like eh, the day, I kind of cracked like eh not cracked but here th they've no heard me, like kind of thing like eh? And I dinae want to go down that road cos here, they'll they'll they'll just not talk to me again, to be quite honest like, and I dinae want this, know what I mean? This kind of carry on like eh? (Graham)*

The difficulties he has come across have left Graham feeling angry, but he has tried to remain calm like Adam. While Graham reports that he can usually contain his anger, his description suggests he struggles with this more now than ever. The *'crack'* he mentions seems an unfamiliar response for him, as we have heard him hide his true feelings in other extracts. The fragility his expression shows demonstrates how challenging it is becoming to control his feelings. As though embarrassed by the *'crack'*, Graham quickly retracts it, and it seems once again he reverts to hiding his genuine emotion. However, it appears that while embarrassment may be one reason to suppress emotions, Graham believes it is more important to hide it for fear of repercussions. Whatever the reason, it seems that showing real emotion at college is complex, and in their attempts to persist, students feel the need to consider the feelings of staff and themselves.

While most participants hid their emotions and tried to remain calm in a sometimes-difficult circumstance, Stuart struggled with this:

> *I had a rotten day on Tuesday, and, it was maths, and, I got so so confused with everything, and frustrated, with it…and I went for a break and me and Kenny were sitting talking, saying I'm actually going to fail this maths or, just get on with it and, do it all wrong. Then, it was building up, and building up and building up and, now, obviously cos I couldn't get up the stairs cos of my [disability], and that, I went up in the lift. And, I ended up punching the wall, full force [laughing]. I didn't actually mean to, but I don't know if that, I don't know if that was just all the anger and stress, and all the, the annoy, the annoyance (Stuart)*

Stuart's extract makes clear the frustration felt by students facing academic difficulty. However, in describing this frustration, he portrays a complete lack of control and an inability to deal with his frustration without lashing out. In saying *'I didn't actually mean to'*, Stuart hints at his actions being a mistake, an act that he was unable to stop. However, his alleged inability to control his temper or physical movement may have been an afterthought, with the benefit of hindsight helping him see his actions with increased clarity. The sudden realisation that his actions were inappropriate might suggest that, while he could have controlled his body, it was his feelings he could not control. Whether Stuart required extra tuition or more time to digest the subject is unclear from his explanation. Still, the transformation of his confusion to frustration, self-doubt, pressure, anger, and stress is evident. His outburst stemmed from confusion, yet many students will not react with such force, as we have seen from other participants. Stuart, himself, seems surprised at his reaction, as though he has grown so accustomed to confusion that he should take it in his stride. However, there are times in academic persistence when maintaining a calm front becomes too difficult.

Participant	Extract	Page; line number
Alison	*I've said to them "look, I need a hand"*	25; 533
Andrew	*I wanted to punch her in the face*	14; 283
Chris	*I have thought about…just packing up my bag and just walking out*	19; 407
Katie	*we get to go down, and see if there's anybody there that can…like help us*	13; 263
Rebecca	*I thought "nah I have to get in contact with my tutor"*	20; 425
Sam	*if I need anything I'll ask my mum*	36; 780
Tristan	*I was so angry…just...incredibly*	18; 371
		n = 11

Figure 24 - Theme occurrences: Dealing with emotions

Summary

The theme of emotion and coping while considering withdrawal revealed some students' emotional difficulty when navigating college. The feeling of being lost and confused throughout the year was evident, as though they found themselves in an unknown space that was unwelcoming and challenging. Thrust into new environments with unknown subjects, people and places became overwhelming and traumatic, and they felt alone and distanced from others. The complexity of their emotions grew as they began to feel worthless to the college. Their perceived insignificance threatened their persistence, as many believed the college was unconcerned with their persistence. Although the current study does not focus on gender, this theme highlighted a specific difference between how male and female students dealt with their emotions. The study's female participants tended to seek support and voice their emotions

through their relationships with others, while the male participants tended to hide their emotions beneath displays of anger. In no way attempting to generalise emotion according to gender, the data pointed to a clear difference. However, while this gender difference is interesting, the alternative actions displayed by male and female participants served a similar purpose, and neither was more effective than the other.

5.5 Chapter Summary

Analysing the data using IPA as described in Chapter Four revealed four super-ordinate themes: 'a disrupted sense of self', 'the push and pull of motivation', 'the ambiguity of agency', and 'emotions and coping while considering withdrawal'. This chapter has shown the origins of each theme and discussed how each theme relates to the participants. Rather than showing any predictive or generalisable data, it has focused on the convergence and divergence within the themes. All four themes have clear overlaps, but each focuses on a distinct area of the experience of academic persistence. Figure 25 shows the four super-ordinate themes and their sub-themes:

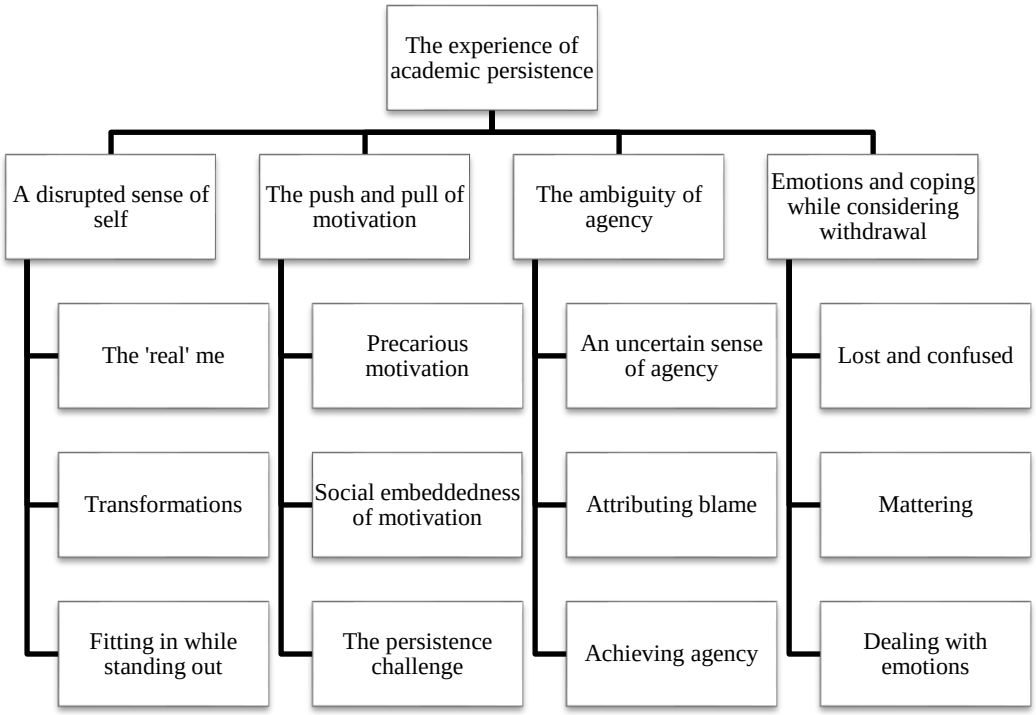


Figure 25 - Super-ordinate and sub-themes

The first theme, 'a disrupted sense of self', focused on the participants' sense of self and how their persistence 'disrupted' it. Specifically, it addressed how they viewed and understood

themselves and the origins of those views, how their sense of self transformed over time, and how they saw themselves in relation to others in college.

The second theme, 'the push and pull of motivation', described how participants experienced their motivation to persist. It focuses on three areas of their experience of motivation: how their motivation grew and lessened with the passage of time and their achievements or failings; how relationships supported, nurtured, threatened, and suppressed their motivation; and finally, how they experienced persistence as a game- or competition-like challenge.

The third theme, 'the ambiguity of agency', demonstrated participants' understanding of agency and its temporality, focusing on three areas in particular. Firstly, it explored the uncertainty of agency as participants attempted to make sense of their autonomy. Secondly, it identified ways in which participants avoided taking complete control over their lives by shifting blame to others or parts of themselves. Finally, it described how their sense of agency grew throughout their academic persistence.

The final theme, 'emotions and coping while considering withdrawal', considered the participants' emotions and how they dealt with them. It identified being lost and confused as the overwhelming feelings as participants struggled to navigate their new landscape. Simultaneously, they revealed the intensely emotional perception that they did or did not 'matter' to the college. Lastly, it acknowledged the apparent gender divide in how the participants acted upon the emotions of persistence, revealing differences between the male and female responses to similar emotions.

Chapter Six discusses each theme further, drawing links to theory and addressing the research questions as initially outlined in Chapter One.

Chapter Six:
Discussion of Key Themes

Chapter Six: Discussion of Key Themes

Introduction

This thesis explores the lived experiences of students who have considered withdrawal from further education and provides insights into the phenomenon of academic persistence from their perspectives. Interpreting the findings presented in Chapter Five helped reveal four themes that underlie the phenomenon. My interpretation of the findings has uncovered students' experiences of academic persistence as disrupting their sense of self, requiring a push-pull motivation, increasing the ambiguity of agency, and being intensely emotional.

This chapter discusses the conclusions drawn from the findings presented in Chapter Five, considering connections with current academic persistence literature, and discussing its place within the theoretical framework of psychological, sociological, and organisational connectedness. It relates the findings to two of the research questions to reveal the lived experience of academic persistence as perceived by the participants and how their experiences developed over time. I address the third research question in Chapter Seven.

6.1 A disrupted sense of self

Throughout the study, participants revealed a complex and often contradictory sense of self that was interrupted and distorted by their studies, their time at college, and their relationships with others. Their comments revealed uncertainty over who they were, how they saw themselves, and how others viewed them. Moreover, their time at college appeared to increase that uncertainty, as though they had never previously stopped to consider their sense of self, from where it emerged, or who helped shape it.

While some participants appeared, at times, confident in their understanding of who they were, others were unsure, and they all looked to others to help discover or confirm their sense of self. Often having worked or studied in the past, they drew on negative and positive experiences to help them understand their sense of self as they worked through college challenges. They used those experiences to understand how they saw that sense of self alter. While most participants described themselves, their attitudes and characteristics as clear-cut, accepting what they saw as their 'natural' self, they each used this understanding differently. For some, conflict grew between their natural self and their changing self, demonstrating a reluctance to allow their college experiences to change them. For others, they saw their changing sense of self as positive.

Their previously held views were often those which were harmful and easier to accept. From feeling 'broken' or 'flawed' to lacking faith in their ability, their conversations revealed that some

participants felt 'trapped' by their sense of self. Their reputations and the labels they perceived as assigned to them throughout their lives haunted them, particularly relating to previous studies, and they found these difficult to abandon. They often perceived themselves as people 'who could not', and they allowed that perception to overtake their ambition and desire to succeed. For some, there was a shift from that perception over time, where their experiences helped them become people 'who could'; however, others found this change too difficult to accept. Regardless of their willingness to seek or adopt a changing sense of self, it became clear that while experiences could 'knock' or alter their sense of self, their earlier sense of self was never far away. Instead, it waited in the background and could reinstate quickly when a negative experience created an opportunity for its revival.

While participants showed a reluctance to fully accept a changing sense of self, research reminds us that the sense of self is ever-changing and related to nature, society, and experiences. As Gee (2000, p. 101) suggests, we have begun to shift

> from foregrounding [one] perspective (we are what we are primarily because of our "natures"), [to another] (we are what we are primarily because of the positions we occupy in society), to [a] third (we are what we are primarily because of our individual accomplishments as they are inter-actionally recognized by others)… [to a] fourth perspective (we are what we are because of the experiences we have had within certain sorts of "affinity groups")… It is crucial to realize that these four perspectives are not separate from each other. Both in theory and in practice, they interrelate in complex and important ways.

Participants' early experiences impacted their sense of self. Difficult schooldays, successful careers, and relationships with others had helped them develop their sense of self over long periods. While immersed in their studies, their self-perception began to change over time. Time spent persisting through challenges gave them time to reflect and reconsider who they were and who they could be. When faced with challenges at college, they could cling to their earlier sense of self which was known and comfortable, or they could attempt to see themselves differently and accept change. For some, their persistence provided time to change; for others, the very act of persisting was the change.

All participants perceived themselves as different, in some way, from others. For some, this created additional challenges. For others, it enabled them to fit in as they abandoned ideas of fitting in with what they saw as the general population and instead sought others who shared their difference. They used their difference, which had become their sense of self, to fit in with groups; in the past, they had not seen that as an option. Their sense of self as 'different' at school or work had now become what they relied upon to fit in. Upon finding their place within a group, they shared experiences and developed common understandings.

Participants' sense of self often centred around social comparisons. Chris, for example, immediately drew comparisons between himself and those he expected to be in his class. Concerned about the age difference and being the 'odd one out', he made assumptions about his prospective classmates and how they might see him as unlike them. Ugur's (2015) study suggested that this tendency to compare oneself with others can have the effect of altering self-concept, as our self-awareness and motivation to succeed are improved. For Chris, who entered college with a preconceived idea of how his fellow students would view him, Ugur's ideas were correct. While he initially identified as a mature student who was different from the others, he could see changes occurring within himself upon settling into the course and developing relationships with his classmates. By the time the research interview took place, close to the end of the course, Chris's sense of self was more in line with his classmates. He had abandoned his mature status and become 'one of the crowd', joining in with the younger students and enjoying doing so.

Adam's time at college also provided the opportunity to reassess his sense of self. Having believed he was less able than others, referring to himself as *'stupid'*, Adam's diagnosis of dyslexia enabled him to reconsider and reappraise himself while developing his self-concept. Yeung *et al.*'s (2014) study supports this dynamic and changing self-concept, explaining that social encounters and activity help self-concept emerge. For Adam, the social encounter that led to his diagnosis was with a staff member, yet this can still be considered social. Able then to understand that his difficulties were due to a learning disability, he allowed himself to redefine himself and accept his struggles as part of his sense of self.

Spady and Tinto's retention theories, first developed around 50 years ago, highlighted the importance of integration, and many research studies have since backed up their theories. The current study revealed integration as central to students' persistence, but found integration links to the sense of self, feelings of difference, and the difficulties of understanding the self. Wilcox *et al.* found integration was instrumental in ensuring students have access to emotional support through which new-found

> …friends become, in effect, surrogate family members, a key source of social support, both enhancing students' general sense of well-being and belonging and providing a buffering effect when students experience difficulties (2005, p. 716).

Some participants in the current study demonstrated this idea through their openly close relationships and reliance on college staff and fellow students. Perhaps the most obvious example of this is Alison, whose relationship with her support worker was so significant that she considered the support worker to be her *'bestie bestie'*. While Alison's relationship with staff was far more pronounced than others in the study, close relationships between staff and students

were noticeable among several participants. Often, as Wilcox *et al.* agree, those relationships appeared more crucial during times of difficulty, ranging from staff providing a listening ear to 'persuading' the students to persist.

While most participants described no such familial or friend-like relationship with staff, their experiences revealed solid bonds and relationships based on reliance. Comments such as *'I owe it to her', 'I would have definitely quit'* and *'if it wasn't for them I wouldn't be here'* point to relationships without which persistence may have proved too challenging for some. While for some there were relationships out with college that supported their persistence, others perceived relationships with staff as crucial. Of the relatively few persistence studies within FE, some have agreed with these participants' perceptions. For example, Rogers (2009) and Zorbas *et al.* (2004) discussed the necessity of staff investment in students. In both studies, participants talked explicitly about their need to see some personal investment, ranging from the perceived care shown by staff during lectures to the time staff were willing to spend with them. While the participants' comments above suggest a great deal of personal investment from staff, the overall picture varied from student to student. Rebecca, on one hand, spoke openly of the support she had received from one college, and was surprised and upset to see this was not always the case. During her latest course, she found staff to be unhelpful and difficult to communicate with, and she felt as though she were dismissed and unimportant. Adam's experience was similar in that he had felt encouraged and worthwhile during an earlier course, yet on his move to his current college he encountered what he perceived as staff with little concern for him. In contrast, Chris had a very different experience. Following a brief spell at a college in which he perceived no investment from staff, he later moved to his current college where he found the staff to be far more concerned with his welfare than he expected. Surprised to 'matter', Chris's experience led him to believe that staff were personally invested in him and his success and, despite his brief encounter with those staff, he held onto that belief which led to an increased sense of belonging and a stronger desire to complete the course.

Meaningful relationships developed at college are often said to offer the support networks essential to social integration (Gabi and Sharpe 2021; Gerdes and Mallinckrodt 1994; Gilardi and Guglielmetti 2011; Odom *et al.* 2016; Thomas and Hanson 2014), and we see this among many participants. Bean and Metzner (1985) found that social integration was challenging for non-traditional students. However, the participants in the current study appeared to use their non-traditional status and found the difficulties they faced in terms of their perceived 'difference' were helpful to their integration. Their differences, ranging from age to academic ability, led the participants to seek others with similar differences and 'join forces' with them. Able then to find shared group values and common challenges increased collaboration, strengthened friendships,

and offered support mechanisms that may otherwise have seemed elusive to these students who considered themselves 'different' to the general college population. One of the most noticeable areas in which participants formed friendships and collaboration was their struggle with dyslexia. Stuart, for example, was keen to express how he perceived himself as part of a group of similar others. Stuart's social network became so essential to his persistence and instrumental in helping him feel part of 'something' that his inclusion in the group meant he felt tight bonds with those in a group that distanced itself from others. His comment *'sorry I shouldn't use this "normal" people'* reveals an 'us and them' scenario, where he has become so entrenched in his status as part of a group that he has begun to see those outside his group as 'different'.

While literature repeatedly suggests integration as key to persistence, some studies have indicated that integration is less critical for some students (Dika and D'Amico 2016; Jenert *et al.* 2016; Young *et al.* 2013). Findings from the current study tend to support integration as positive for most students and highlight the various ways individuals can achieve or perceive integration. Sam's experiences, as a participant who lacks any form of integration on the surface, were complex. Her lack of integration appeared to weigh heavily on her mind, and she suggested on more than one occasion that her lack of friends on her course made her studies more challenging. At no time, however, did Sam indicate this lack of integration as a reason to withdraw. Rather than seeking opportunities to integrate, she withdrew from them, yet she openly relished the occasions when class tasks forced her to mix with others. As a result, Sam became what Gilardi and Gugliemetti (2011) describe as a 'non-interacting student'. However, despite this, she persisted, which is a one-in-ten situation, according to the researchers.

The literature and current study demonstrate the complex nature of self and persistence based on individual characteristics, time, circumstances, and relationships. While we often accept integration as key to persistence, individuals' sense of self leads them to integrate to different degrees, in different ways, with different groups and for different reasons. As Trent (2020) suggests, awareness and experience of difference can be resilience-enhancing and strength-building.

The current study seeks to understand the experiences of those who have persisted with their studies despite considering withdrawal. The analysis of the participants' conversations revealed uncertainty of their sense of self and how it changes over time, and the challenges and benefits of fitting in. Participants' uncertain and changing sense of self suggest difficulty among the participants in understanding their relationship with themselves as 'agents' and aligning with others. The participants' sense of self and how it intersects with multiple areas of life and study align with the theory of Agency, particularly Socio-Ecological Agency as described by Schoon (2018).

While agency focuses on individuals' ability to act, it can neglect their embeddedness within social and organisational structures. Socio-Ecological Agency, in contrast, focuses on the integration of individuals, their interactions with others and their lifeworld, and 'takes into account individuals' capacity to act and the structural constraints and opportunities shaping human behaviour' (Schoon 2018, p. 8). Importantly, it also considers the temporal development of agency. Schoon argues that to understand individuals' agency, we must allow for social, structural, and cultural conditions, and refrain from viewing agency as a personality characteristic. Individuals may be naturally agentic, but the concept is malleable and relational.

This holistic approach to agency helps us understand the participants' dilemmas relating to their sense of self. Even those who were confident in their character and who demonstrated long-held beliefs that they acted in specific ways due to their inherent nature began questioning their sense of self as they moved through their studies. Their challenges, and at times their challenging behaviour, forced them to reconsider who they were and why they acted as they did. They questioned their natural responses, the behaviour of others, and the beliefs they held about themselves, others, and the social and organisational structures of which they were part. Socio-Ecological Agency addresses this changing nature of self and how the participants' sense of self became confused as they entered and worked through college and its associated challenges. Sam's description demonstrates how she saw her sense of self as fixed, as though her character was an inherent part of her being:

> *I was a prefect at school and I had to look after the younger kids and things so it, it's, yeah I think it's just in my nature and I'm happy to be like that (Sam)*

Sam perceived herself as naturally caring, and she felt satisfied with this part of her character, yet she struggled with her ambiguous characteristics.

> *But then…I don't know if it really is cos I'm lazy or is it just that I've not been happy…like (Sam)*

The change in how Sam describes herself demonstrates her increasing self-criticism and questioning throughout the interview and how her character and sense of self have changed and become less clear throughout her studies. Over time, as she has struggled with attendance, Sam has become less like the person she used to be. Her previous achievements and enjoyment at school have paled against her lack of achievement and enjoyment at college. Where once she had been a high achiever and formed strong bonds with classmates, her move to college and away from family and friends saw her losing her perceived ability to integrate and retain her high-achieving status. Unhappy with her situation, Sam blamed herself, assuming her character led to her absenteeism and subsequent failure to integrate. Sam only began unpicking and questioning

what lay at the heart of her struggles when she was in a situation where she was encouraged to consider it. The change in environment and the new social structures in which Sam found herself altered her sense of self. Sam's approach to navigating these challenges was to distance herself through further absences, where the opposite reaction may have been more productive.

Like others in the current study, Sam struggled to accept and fulfil her status as a student. Their past experiences, whether school, college, or work, have shaped their sense of self over time and led to them feeling at odds with their new environments and social structures. Research has argued that Student Identity Centrality, where being a student is central to one's self-definition, can

> play a key role in determining student success both as a direct predictor of success outcomes and by buffering the relationships between students' experiences and their goal commitment' (Bowman and Felix 2017, p. 245).

While 'being a student' might come naturally to some, however, for those who enter college following periods of work or raising a family, these 'off-time transitions…require greater effort…and can be more risky' (Schoon 2018, p. 20). Rather than seeking student identity centrality in these cases, Kinney-Walker (2015) suggests student identity salience may be more appropriate. As Kinney-Walker explains, while identifying as a student may be helpful, it does not necessarily need to be their only or central identity. For those with previous central identities, they can identify as being students while maintaining their other identities. Able then to link their multiple identities, these students may be more inclined to persist with their studies as they see the benefit of their persistence as relating to past experiences and future aspirations.

Their sense of self was never, and could never be, separated from their lifeworld. As Spencer-Oatey and Dauber (2019, p. 12) explain, 'the human cannot be completely separated from the structural, as the latter can facilitate (or hamper) the former'. Participants based their earlier sense of self on their earlier experiences, and now they used their more recent experiences to enhance, alter and redefine their sense of self. Their previous school and work experiences brought an 'institutional' or 'organisational' element to their sense of self. Their sense of self, which their previous involvement in school, college, or work had moulded, now needed to re-mould to fit with college. For many, their experiences within organisations had led to social comparisons and feelings of difference as they struggled to fit in. These feelings had long-term effects on how they perceived themselves. As they persisted through college, they did not let go of or abandon those early experiences, relationships, or early sense of self to replace it with a new version. Instead, they supplemented their early experiences with new experiences, embraced new relationships which helped them make sense of previous relationships, and used these to re-shape and rediscover their sense of self.

6.2 The push and pull of motivation

While we typically accept motivation as necessary for academic achievement and persistence, the complexity of motivating factors, their interplay, and how motivation changes over time, are evident within the current study. Participants' narratives revealed far more motivational complexity than even they were aware of, describing how they pushed away from negative experiences, were pulled towards potentially better experiences, and how these instances were seldom purely 'theirs'. Instead, their relationships and connections with others played a vital role in encouraging, motivating, and demotivating, and their experiences demonstrated the sometimes-cyclical nature of motivation.

Conversations revealed doing and achieving as inherently motivational, with the act of doing, regardless of difficulty, helpful in overcoming times of demotivation. Past events and future aspirations were similarly motivational, both able to spur the participants on but for different reasons. Using the past to push them forward and ensure they did not fall foul of similar experiences again, they used the future to pull them away from difficulty and towards their goals. Whether through actively avoiding difficulties or pursuing their future aspirations, their heightened sense of purpose seemed to help push or pull them through and provide the necessary motivation.

While determination, doing, and achievement helped bolster their motivation, their self-criticism and lack of self-belief threatened it. However, difficulties supported their motivation, as though triumph over adversity was more meaningful than triumph alone. The study uncovered the precarious nature of motivation throughout academic persistence. Something inherently motivational, such as praise or achievement, could be altered instantly by a negative comment or an achievement that they, or others, did not consider 'enough'. While effort could motivate them to try harder or persist through challenges, an effort that did not lead to achievement was often demotivating.

The participants in the study sought and used motivation from various sources. However, while most saw connections between self-determination and other internal characteristics and their motivation to persist, fewer of them linked others' influences on their motivation. The motivation provided by others, for those who recognised others' influence on their persistence, gave them not only the desire but the reason to persist. They felt a sense of duty towards those who had supported and encouraged them, seeing their persistence as a way of demonstrating gratitude. The relationships participants have or had with others who provided their motivation were crucial, yet the relationships varied. While some focused on impressing those currently in their lives, others focused on those they had lost, and for one participant, motivation came from those she

had yet to meet. Whether support and encouragement from others occurred in the past or present was irrelevant, it was the relationships and their meaning in the participants' lives that were important and motivational. Hlinka (2017) notes similar findings regarding the push of motivation. Family support provided a motivational 'push' to embark on college studies that students in her research believed crucial to their persistence. In contrast with the current study, the 'pull' effect she found related to a pull away from their studies by their family obligations. In the current study, the support offered in some cases, while perhaps necessary for the participants' successes, became overwhelming and unhelpful at times. For some, motivation came from others' negativity and lack of encouragement, and conversations revealed a desire to persist despite, not because of, others. Their ambition to prove others wrong and demonstrate their ability despite challenges helped form motivation within those who struggled to see any positive motivation.

Their conversations revealed complex and nuanced motivation, with neither self-motivation nor motivation from others or experiences holding the key to their persistence. Instead, the combination of self-determination, past experiences and future aspirations, and others' belief (or disbelief) worked as one, interlinking to provide encouragement and reasons to persist. While many participants saw themselves as the only reason for their persistence, it was clear from their conversations how dependent on others they had been. Arafeh *et al.* (2020) report a similar finding; students in their online persistence study spoke of their self-motivation being key to completion, while simultaneously reporting that staff had provided motivation. Without motivation from others, whether positive or negative, it seems likely that some participants in the current study may have withdrawn. Nevertheless, without some internal motivation to succeed, regardless of reason, it seems unlikely that the external motivation from others would have sufficed.

Like studies linking persistence to integration, those that link persistence to motivation have spanned decades, with Summerskill's research in the 1960s one of the first to suggest motivation is paramount. We see Summerskill's ideas, differentiating between motivation to study and motivation to persist, in more recent studies such as McKendry *et al.* (2014), who suggest motivation to persist is often linked to role models. The participants in the current study echo McKendry *et al.*'s findings, with Sam, in particular, demonstrating how her role model, her mother, had a significant impact on her persistence. Her statement, *'it's not like I only go to college cos of my mum'* belies some of her other comments, in which she stressed her desire to be successful like she considered her mother to be and the pride she felt in her mother's achievements. While Sam's story clearly linked to a role model, others revealed similar role models and the motivation those role models provided. Both Stuart and Tristan, for example,

were open about their desire to make their grandparents proud and the roles they played in their persistence.

Sam's motivation relating to role models was complex; she drew upon her mother as a role model and alluded to herself as a potential role model in the future. She spoke of children, something she saw her future holding, and she was determined to become a role model for them. Looking towards the future in this way, despite the uncertainty of her academic and professional future, she gave herself something to focus on and a reason to persist. Children also played a critical role in Graham's life, as he saw himself as a role model to his children. To Graham, the cost of withdrawal did not relate to himself, his opportunities or even his feelings; it was linked instead to his children *('the only thing keeps me going is my kids hen, like eh eh, if it wasn't cos my kids and I'd have been left here long ago')*. Graham's determination to show his children he could persist through his difficulties and avoid their potential disappointment fuelled his persistence.

Several participants demonstrated the role of integration in motivation, and, as suggested by Young *et al.* (2013), positive interactions with peers and staff helped many in their decisions to persist. For some participants, this came from discussions with staff during which they specifically talked about withdrawing. At that point, some perceived they were 'talked out of' withdrawing, but for others, the integration played a more subtle motivational role. The opportunity to discuss and share challenges and see themselves as part of a group led to increased motivation among the participants. In Adam's case, for example, when classmates sided with him *('there was three students that were going to refuse to do [it], unless I got to do it')*, his challenge led to increased integration. As others perceived the college's actions as unfair, they stood united with Adam against the college. The realisation that others were keen for Adam to integrate served to motivate him to continue studying and fighting for his rights.

Much of the literature that discusses motivation alongside persistence refers to the differences between extrinsic and intrinsic motivation. Deci *et al.* (1991) suggest that persistence is linked more with intrinsic than extrinsic motivation, a finding backed by Morrow and Ackermann (2012); however, the findings from the current study suggest a far more nuanced situation. The current study revealed that participants sought motivation from various sources. They often saw their motivation as purely internal, based on sheer determination and will, yet drew on college staff, family, and friends to support their motivation. Their desire to succeed based on past challenges, current circumstances and future aspirations bolstered their motivation, and the ultimate motivation came from complex and intertwined relationships between themselves and others. This complex interplay between internal and external motivation corroborates the findings of ten Hoeve *et al.* (2017). It demonstrates a need to avoid reducing such multifaceted issues to theorise the human experience of persistence.

Motivation is not a straightforward concept. However, we often look to unpick the concept as though one part of students' lives and studies motivate and influence their persistence. The conversations from the current study reveal the complexity of motivation and how it affects, supports, and hinders students' academic persistence, demonstrating that no single motivating factor is essential for persistence. As Pizzolato *et al.* (2017, p. 304) argue,

> …it is important to consider motivation as a developing, multidimensional construct. Adult learners may enter community college with a diverse set of roles, each with their own achievement goals and motivations. The more that motivation to learn is seen as existing in concert with motivation along other roles the student has, the clearer obstacles and supports for motivation to learn will become. When investigating motivation, focusing on both achievement goal types and rationales behind achievement goal types highlights how motivation to learn may overlap with motivation in other areas of participants' lives, and may shed light on the etiology of performance-approach goals.

Participants in the current study were motivated in various ways, with motivation linked to past, present, and future circumstances, their situations, and the situations of others. They demonstrated how the origins of their motivation, and how they used it, linked to personal and family life, self-belief, and home and college environments. They revealed how these areas of their lives were inseparable when navigating the complexities of learning. Regardless of how and why we attempt to untangle the complexity of motivation, it is both inherent and acquired, and we cannot attribute it to a particular area of life.

Participants revealed academic persistence's game-like nature, describing an inherently motivational desire to 'win'. In contrast, any sign of 'losing' could create a game that was no longer motivating and from which they were likely to withdraw. Opponents in these 'games' ranged from family and friends to staff. While encouragement from any was typically motivational, instances in which they felt challenged by staff left them demotivated and threatened their persistence.

The current study demonstrates how attempts to untangle and simplify motivation to persist as either purely psychological, sociological, or organisational are inherently flawed. Participants confirmed the need for numerous sources of motivation, even though they may not have seen them as such. They showed how self-determination was bolstered by experience and other people, highlighting the inextricable links between the three areas. What they experienced as motivation that linked directly to their character often followed conversations with others, and they drew on the experience of others or their relationships with them to strengthen their internal motivation. Equally, the college environment provided motivation of which they were not always aware. The practical support for some participants, ranging from one-to-one support for students

with learning difficulties to guidance meetings during challenging times, was offered to support the students who otherwise may have withdrawn due to significant challenges. Participants recognised this support as helpful, motivational and, at times, utterly necessary. Less obvious and less structured support was, however, also provided by the colleges. Chris's description of a one-off support meeting on his first day demonstrates the college's instinctive reactions to students in difficulty. A new student, unknown to staff, was helped and supported in a way he did not expect. Their early conversation, in which the staff member reminded him that he had as much 'right' to be studying as his classmates, was enough to counter his feelings, yet the conversation itself was not what Chris found most helpful. His connection to the college instantly formed at that moment when he began to feel part of the organisation.

The study also demonstrates the fragility of motivation and how precarious academic persistence can be when it relies on something unsettled. Only one participant, Chris, spoke of motivation which had grown steadily throughout his course. Following a difficult start, he and his motivation grew and strengthened, albeit with low points at various intervals when doubt set in based on the future. On the contrary, the other participants demonstrated the ever-changing nature of motivation, which could dissolve as quickly as it appeared. For those students whose motivation wavered over the entire academic year, their periods of motivation were vital to help them overcome their more difficult times.

6.3 The ambiguity of agency

Participants demonstrated varying degrees of agency, and their agency was ever-changing. Other studies have tended towards rating levels of agency as higher or lower for individual students; however, the current study finds comparisons are neither practical nor desirable. All participants demonstrated times when their sense of agency was high and low, with those ups and downs tying in with the ups and downs of their immediate circumstances, past experiences, and plans for the future.

Several participants drew upon specific instances where they had felt utterly out of control. During those times, they had felt so helpless and unable to exert any form of control over their situations that their sense of agency was noticeably low. For some, the effects of these low points were unlike anything they had experienced before, while for others, there was a sense they had possibly encountered similar situations previously. For some, the outcomes were psychological, with feelings associated with stress and depression threatening their studies, while others found relief through physical altercations.

Some saw control as having been removed from them; despite their preference to retain some sense of control, they felt stripped of this by college staff or family. At other times, participants demonstrated a confused sense of control, where some specific part of themselves was in control of their entire being. They saw their brains and minds as taking over and enforcing conditions upon them that were unsurmountable. There was little sense of control over the self in these instances, and therefore, no control over their actions.

Unsure who should control them and their actions, some participants appeared to accept others' instructions or requests with no question of their sense. Perhaps attempting to fit in with the college society, they accepted the rules and expectations despite some apparent unhappiness. For some, it was a relief to have others take control, as they willingly passed control over their lives to others. Thus, they simultaneously accepted their lack of control and relinquished any opportunity for control, handing power to those they would later fight for control.

As Toshalis and Nakula (2012) explain, initiatives often attempt to give students a 'voice'. However, in particular, Tristan indicated that he felt entirely bereft of the opportunity for the college to hear his voice. Despite his opinions that some of the tasks that staff allocated him or that the teaching methods were *'stupid'*, he made no attempts to reconcile his differences with tutors. Instead, Tristan did as tutors asked and, at times, did so without the necessary support. For Tristan, he was part of an organisation with rules and processes to abide by, and he chose to abide by them. Rather than instilling a sense of agency, as recommended by Maehr (1976, cited in Thomas 1980), the methods used by Tristan's college have heightened his awareness that he is a student, a part of an organisation in which he feels he has no voice.

In contrast to the numerous stories about lost control and those from which we might conclude a low sense of agency, however, participants also offered details of times at which they had been assertive in their persistence. Whether resisting the control of others or merely realising they had opportunities to control their futures, many delighted in their explanations of their shifting sense of agency. Although agency in its current conceptual form did not appear within the early retention literature, we can see connections to agency through Tinto's discussions of involvement and integration. Establishing the need for integration and belonging, Tinto is clear that students' involvement in shaping their learning enhances persistence and that this can be promoted through cooperative, collaborative learning, in which they begin to achieve a sense of responsibility for their learning as well as others' (Tinto 2003).

Resistance has been looked at more recently by O'Shea (2015); however, her discussion focuses on the positive aspect of resistance. According to her research, students' sense of agency ties into resistance (and other) capital. This resistance capital can be beneficial for students in their

perseverance as it aids motivation levels. Resisting the limitations set upon them by others or institutions forces students to consider their goals and push towards them regardless of others' opinions. This idea is evident throughout the current study, particularly among those participants whose previous school experiences left them feeling disregarded by teachers. Alison demonstrates this resistance and its motivational power in her description of refusing to let others *'dictate'* her life. Using her newfound sense of control, Alison fought back against those who had previously lessened her motivation and began to show a sense of agency over her situation. We saw how Alison did not yet feel fully in control, as she described what she 'should be doing', showing she was slowly beginning to realise her capabilities and the sense of agency she must find within herself.

Difficult schooling had impacted several students, Graham in particular. Describing his school as prison-like and struggling with a learning difficulty, he found college similarly challenging. A mature student with many years of employment behind him, Graham struggled to return to his student status and found accepting support challenging. Zepke *et al.* (2009) explain that negative experiences of schooling breeds resistance to the educational culture, and Graham's negative school experiences demonstrate this. He talked of how staff tried to help, but he found their support condescending rather than helpful, as though he were being talked down to and treated as child-like. On several occasions, Graham referred to himself as not *'daft'*, as though he believed the staff treated him that way.

Stuart demonstrated resistance against staff on several occasions, during which he showed some lack of respect for staff and other students. Resisting the college rules and, at times, the support the college offered him, Stuart's resistance capital and sense of agency were confused. Content neither with being supported nor unsupported, Stuart resisted the rules by lashing out. Attempting to demonstrate a sense of power against staff, he crossed boundaries as though he were testing staff and rules while aware of his status as a student.

O'Shea's findings offer more than resistance capital in support of agency, and she proposes we take an alternative view of non-traditional students. Rather than accepting the deficit models of non-traditional students, she suggests their alternative forms of capital do or can support our students' sense of agency. We see this in Rebecca's narrative, particularly when she talked about her lack of control. Rebecca, who speaks of feeling completely out of control, and of things *'spiralling out of control'*, came to college with an extensive and skilled background. Having worked successfully for many years, Rebecca's sense of being out of control was more pronounced than that of other participants. We might see Rebecca as having some form of established career capital, with an ability to work under pressure, meet deadlines, and deal with difficulties on a day-to-day basis. Nevertheless, when placed in an unknown environment and

facing challenges that she saw no way of overcoming, she was suddenly out of her comfort zone and unable to accept her perceived lack of control. Slowly, Rebecca regained her sense of control by considering her strengths and reclaiming the control that she had previously enjoyed. Unlike Stuart, who had exerted a form of 'power-as-agency', Rebecca's sense of agency appeared to grow from a place of self-control, and we see her beginning to take control of her studies just as she did of her previous career and decision to study. It seems that for Rebecca, and possibly other mature students who have previously felt in control of their lives, persistence through challenging academic times helps them reconsider and regain their previous sense of agency.

Zepke *et al.*'s research on Foucault's governmentality also highlights some tensions between students and discipline. As with some participants in the current study, their findings showed students were willing to change their behaviour to fit with the 'norm' of the institution and to discipline group members whose behaviour did not fit with the norm. The current study revealed that participants could discipline others more easily than they could discipline themselves, demonstrating power over others while attempting to feel a greater sense of agency. Stuart, for example, showing his awareness of college rules and expectations, was quick to turn against other students when he believed their behaviour was inappropriate. His challenging behaviour, however, was not welcomed by staff. In attempting to demonstrate his sense of agency, his actions at times revealed a confused sense of agency, as he took control of situations that were out of his control rather than focusing on his behaviour and opportunity to learn.

Learner agency and its links to hope, as discussed by Kibby (2015), were visible in the current study. For several participants, particularly Chris, future aspirations were a concern that inhibited their sense of agency. With an uncertain career ahead of him, Chris's worries over his course choice were substantial, as he began to feel a complete lack of control over his future. Worried about what his future career might be, Chris had already attempted to take charge of his life by returning to college. However, having overcome his initial challenges during which he had struggled to feel any sense of agency, he faced further challenges. For Chris, his return to college and enjoyment of his course allowed him to control his present while abandoning a problematic past. However, it also meant embracing an uncertain future, potentially jeopardising his sense of agency. Sam, who found more enjoyment from helping classmates than she did from her own learning experience, confirms Kibby's findings that recognition of experience and expertise can help foster a sense of agency. As someone with experience in helping colleagues and carrying out creative and administrative tasks in the workplace, Sam was able to use these skills in college to help others who were less experienced than herself. Sam continually questioned the control she had over herself, particularly her attendance at college, as she struggled to understand why she was unable to attend regularly. She repeatedly asserted that some 'thing' stopped her

attending, revealing a weak sense of agency in this respect. However, as the interview progressed, Sam became more aware of her thinking and ability to control her actions. The praise staff gave her, and her ability to share her experience and expertise, helped develop her agency thinking to the level where she began believing that she could help future students *(Maybe I could sort of be like a helper).*

Throughout the study, participants demonstrated incredible determination despite numerous challenges before, during, and after college. However, their commitment to persisting as an act of agency cannot be reduced to personal, psychological factors. Sociological and ecological factors merged with psychological factors to support their enactment of agency. While some literature has focused on these individual parts of students' persistence, what has received less attention is the links between them, which Socio-Ecological Agency can help us do. Schoon's integrated model of learner agency helps us recognise the embeddedness of individual agency within the broader context. She reminds us that

> …agency is not a personality characteristic. It is a dynamic and relational process that unfolds and develops over time, shaped by interactions between a developing individual and a changing social context. In a world characterised by rapid social change and transformation it is necessary for individuals to adjust to, cope with, and take advantage of the changing opportunities and constraints (Schoon 2018, pp. 4–5)

Throughout the interviews, participants demonstrated this embeddedness of agency, from their descriptions of individual characteristics and themselves as *'determined'* to their stories that positioned themselves within the organisation, within timescales, and within families and other groups. Their student status served to reduce and enhance their sense of agency as they struggled with academic work and felt hampered by rules and expectations yet accepted the opportunity to study as beneficial for their future and the future of their families. Their backgrounds and past experiences had shaped them, from negative experiences creating discomfort and worry and a belief that they could not change, to positive experiences that gave them the courage to go further and the will to succeed. Their families and friendships helped them realise their agency thinking opportunities and take control of their futures through negative and positive relationships. When taken together, we see participants' individual agency through their motivation, determination and attempts to control their studies, their co-agency without which they would struggle from the support of family, friends, and staff who provide reassurance and teaching, and their collective agency through shared experience and collaboration and their attempts to join forces for the benefit of others. While we might attempt to reduce students' sense of agency to personality traits, high or low levels, and a desire or reluctance to take control, the participants in this study

offer narratives that demonstrate agency's complexity and embeddedness within psychological, sociological, and organisational constructs.

6.5 Revealing the lived experience of students of academic persistence

The lived experience of students who have considered withdrawal is challenging to define. Each student has their own unique set of circumstances surrounding their studies, previous educational experiences, home life, relationships, and health. Notwithstanding these differences, however, participants presented some apparent similarities regarding how they experienced what were, at times, very different situations.

Participants shared experiences of striving to persist while dealing with personal and academic complexities. Often faced with dualisms regarding their sense of self, as they struggled to be 'themselves' while attempting to 'fit in', they gave open and honest accounts of their difficulties navigating the college landscape. The most salient sense of self participants expressed was one of difference. For some, this was a difference relating to age; for others, it was learning difficulty or academic ability. These differences were a constant reminder of their sense of self and their ability or inability to fit into the social 'norms' of college life.

Their experiences from school combined with experiences from life in general were brought with them to college and collectively created an acute awareness of how they perceived others viewed them and how they viewed themselves. These perceptions resulted in them using their differences, at times, to both support and hinder their integration while they sought to determine who they were and how they should act in the college environment. Their previous experiences, particularly negative experiences, constrained them and left them feeling worthless and unimportant, and they struggled to see past the identities that had formed in their earlier lives. They relied on relationships with similar others, and those they believed could support them, often looking for shared experiences with those who could offer shared understanding and potentially remove feelings of inequality. Throughout their studies, participants searched for ways to fit in, either because of their differences or despite them. The mutual understandings they gained from those in similar situations or facing similar challenges appeared to have a diluting effect. They shared experiences and found strength and courage from the solidarity and camaraderie of shared experience.

For some, a sense of conflict arose between their sense of self in general, often based on background and family, and their academic sense of self, based on their ability and achievements in college. They questioned their understanding of self as they perceived their 'true' self and their 'college' self as different and could not understand whether this is considered normal or

abnormal. Often confident in their perceived understanding of self, they struggled to adapt to and adopt their changing sense of self, uncertain of how this would impact them and their studies.

They often asserted that their motivation was entirely internal, yet their stories uncovered more complex motivation which was linked to and often dependent on others, suggesting that for them, there is no strict divide between internal and external motivation. The blend of factors that led to their motivation appeared to strengthen and support one another, with neither internal nor external motivation providing an all-encompassing solution during difficult times. Some openly attributed their persistence to others, seeing the support and friendship of others as essential to their success. The support and friendship that helped their motivation arose in various ways and crossed stereotypical boundaries between staff and students at times. Managing these unconventional relationships was complex, with participants experiencing disagreements as well as encouragement and support. Their motivation to study and their motivation to persist was, at times, different, with motivation to persist harder to pinpoint than the motivation that led them to study in the first place. As Summerskill (1962) suggested almost six decades ago, motivation to study is not enough; students require motivation to graduate, and their motivation will change throughout their time at college.

Participants demonstrated a confused sense of agency throughout their studies, vocalising a desire to be in control hampered by unreadiness. Their stories highlighted the complexities of control in personally and academically challenging situations, in which they saw adverse outcomes as potentially outweighing the benefits of exercising control. Often looking to others to help them with or take control, they appeared to appreciate the support of others yet simultaneously disregarded it. Their past experiences directly affected their perceptions of control, and they used these experiences to determine the levels of control they should exert. Struggling to maintain control during difficult times meant they demonstrated extreme versions of control, from exerting control in a manner that suggested power to completely relinquishing any form of control, with little in-between. With challenging situations widespread among the participants, and their apparent struggle to take control, it became clear that they neither wanted nor needed control at times; however, there was a constant need to retain a sense of control.

Participants described their emotions as part of their sense of self and as related to specific experiences. Their stories highlighted emotions that changed with situations that were difficult to deal with and difficult to control. These emotions ranged from vivid descriptions of fear and angst, upset and disillusionment when facing difficult situations, to the joy they felt during positive experiences. While some participants demonstrated a need to disguise their feelings, others displayed their feelings openly. During their most emotionally laden experiences, some avoided dealing with their emotions while others faced situations head-on. The emotions

displayed were complex and often deep-rooted in experience and current situations. The interplay between past and present, and those with whom they had close relationships, impacted their emotions and how they displayed and dealt with those emotions.

6.6 The development of academic persistence

The complex interplay of sense of self, motivation, agency, and the various emotions tied up within the participants' experiences demonstrate an unsteady yet progressive shift towards persistence over time. For most, there was no 'defining moment' when all became clear, withdrawal became unnecessary, and when they took persistence for granted. Instead, there were times when thoughts of withdrawal became all-consuming, and persistence seemed the least likely outcome, contrasted with times when motivation and desire to persist superseded any thoughts of withdrawal. These times were not, however, linear. Instead, gradual shifts towards final goals of persisting to the end of an academic year came with challenges and 'bumps in the road'. However, what is apparent is that over time, with the experience of having dealt with earlier challenges, the negative effects of those challenges became less intense and easier to handle.

Participants explored their sense of self throughout the year and began to uncover what their 'true' self might be. Previous experiences, relationships, and studies had shaped their identities on arrival at college, and they were already satisfied that they knew who they were and of what they were capable. For some, experiences immediately turned their sense of self upside down, while the process for others was long. Meeting others from similar backgrounds with similar challenges allowed them to reconsider themselves as part of a wider community. Difficulties fitting in posed opportunities and challenges; newfound friendships and collegiality among class groups helped those expecting to be outsiders to redefine themselves as individuals with something to offer. Overcoming challenges and finding areas where they could excel allowed them to focus on building strategies and resilience, which would help them through the more difficult times. While positive experiences boosted them and provided the impetus to persist in the short term, negative experiences often had a similar effect.

Their experiences often linked to a perceived lack of control, but this declined over time. At the outset, a negative experience may have caused such distress that the participants could see no way of regaining control of their situation. However, later in the year, the impact of negative experiences was dissipating. Views grew from 'disaster' to 'just another setback', as life's reality and inherent challenges began to take over from individual difficulties. Having dealt successfully with earlier challenges, they were perhaps able to see the light at the end of the tunnel, embrace their ability to deal with negative experiences, and give themselves credit for that ability.

Emotionally, the entire academic year was turbulent for some participants. However, there was a notable change for many over time. Emotions themselves remained unchanged; an upsetting event, for example, was still an upsetting event later in the year. However, the extent to which a participant became consumed by that event diminished. There could be many reasons for this; the light at the end of the tunnel, the strength of friendships built up during the year, or increased use of support services.

There is no distinct timeline for persistence. Instead, individuals experience and demonstrate their persistence during times that are unique to them. Participants clearly articulated this, as they described persistence from their first day of college to the days of the research interviews close to the end of the academic year. For some, the challenges that had given rise to their thoughts of withdrawal had been immediate upon starting college. For others, challenges had developed over the year.

In some cases, the challenges themselves diminished. In others, the challenges remained similar but their ability to overcome those challenges grew. For those whose struggles were past, the associated feelings remained just as clear and distressing throughout the year as they did for those continuing to face challenges. The open and emotional discussions in which the participants engaged confirmed the upset and courage they had used to face their unique challenges, demonstrating the lasting effects of a difficult journey.

6.7 Chapter Summary

This chapter has attempted to consolidate the themes and their interpretations into four key areas: a disrupted sense of self, the push and pull of motivation, the ambiguity of agency, and emotions and coping while considering withdrawal. It has brought together the main ideas from the participants' narratives and my interpretations of those narratives, and demonstrated how current academic persistence literature supports those ideas. The chapter demonstrates how each theme and the experiences that underlie them cannot be separated and studied as purely psychological, sociological, or organisational. On the contrary, it shows how each theme connects through participants' psychological, sociological, and organisational experiences – their lifeworld.

The final sections of the chapter have attempted to bring the key ideas together to reveal the experience of academic persistence in further education and how this experience develops over time. The final chapter concludes this research by discussing the key areas that the thesis has found underlie the phenomenon of academic persistence in further education.

Chapter Seven:
Conclusions

Chapter Seven: Conclusions

The literature rarely discusses the experience of further education students' persistence, despite the large volume of FE students in Scotland and the importance placed on retention in the UK. Despite widening participation agendas and the growing proportion of students from disadvantaged backgrounds in FE, studies remain consistently focused on persistence in HE. Many of these studies concentrate on withdrawal rates and the various interventions that institutions implement to increase persistence. The current study intends to provide a new understanding of FE students' lived experience of persistence. It acknowledges the multi-faceted experiences of the individuals and recognises the potential of individual experience to generate a deeper understanding of persistence in FE more widely.

The study used an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach to gain an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon of academic persistence, encouraging participants to share their lived experiences. Participants shared their experiences of what led them to consider withdrawal and the challenges they faced, their perceptions of how they could persist despite those challenges, and how it felt to go through an FE course while considering withdrawal.

Chapter Five outlined the main findings from the study, drawing attention to the four themes and their emergence from the analysis. Participants' verbatim quotes from the interviews illustrated the themes to demonstrate how those themes developed throughout the analysis process. Chapter Six discussed the themes further, drawing connections with literature and demonstrating their alignment with the theoretical framework, linking psychological, sociological, and organisational approaches to understanding academic persistence.

The findings help us understand the research questions that guided the study, and Chapters Five and Six illuminate how the experiences, relationships, and emotions that students feel combine to create a lived experience that is personal, nuanced, ever-changing, and challenging. The participants' experiences lead us to focus on the research questions according to the following four separate, yet inextricably linked, themes:

- 'I'm not what I thought I was': a disrupted sense of self
- 'Just getting on with it': the push and pull of motivation
- 'Did I just decide myself?' The ambiguity of agency
- 'What am I doing here?' Emotions and coping while considering withdrawal.

An IPA study should be based on homogenous groups to examine a phenomenon thoroughly (Smith *et al*. 2009). As such, the current study focused on students enrolled on FE courses in Scottish colleges, all of whom had considered withdrawing from their courses at some point throughout the academic year. While the participants were not required to share any other obvious demographic similarities, they often described similar experiences and characteristics. Regardless of background or characteristic, each participant described their college journey in terms of the four themes, demonstrating confusion about their sense of self and agency, their motivational challenges, and difficulty coping with mixed emotions.

This final chapter returns to the main findings to make sense of the academic persistence phenomenon and to highlight the multiple dimensions underlying individuals' experiences. It then discusses the thesis's contribution to knowledge in both existing subject and methodological literature. The chapter then focuses on the third research question to address potential changes in professional practice that arise from this study. Finally, the thesis concludes with recommendations for further research, concluding remarks, and reflections on the research process.

7.1 The 'academic persistence' phenomenon

The current study found that the experiences of students who persist in FE despite considering withdrawal are complex, nuanced, and multi-dimensional. Experiences that underlie thoughts of withdrawal are compounded by prior and subsequent experiences, relationships with others, and how individuals feel, understand, and cope with those experiences. Such complexity and nuance cannot be explained by or reduced to an individual theory or 'answer', nor can it be understood by focusing on one theoretical area. Instead, the experience of academic persistence deserves attention from psychological, sociological, and organisational viewpoints combined to provide a more holistic and valuable understanding which can help drive change for and with our students and staff. The academic persistence phenomenon closely relates to psychological, sociological, and organisational aspects of education. We can begin to unpick and understand the phenomenon if we attend to students' disrupted sense of self, push and pull of motivation, sense of agency, and emotions and coping strategies. The study identified four key themes, but while each theme links to the others, it is helpful to address each theme in turn and demonstrate how we can understand each from a psychological, sociological, or organisational standpoint.

The first theme, 'A disrupted sense of self', reveals how individuals view themselves while attempting to persist in FE. Often with seemingly clear-cut and distinct understandings of their character, challenging times at college force them to reconsider and reappraise their sense of self.

The ‘psychological’ self, or how individuals view their character, disposition, and nature, independent of others’ perceptions, is not always easy to grasp. While some can quickly propose their natural and inherent character, further probing or consideration can make this less ‘known’. Academic persistence may not change the psychological self but thinking and talking about their persistence may help students reflect on, understand, and accept their sense of self.

The ‘sociological’ self, or how individuals attach meaning to their sense of self based on others’ perceptions or interactions with others, develops over time and can become increasingly evident as individuals describe how others view them. Whether with family, friends, or staff in school, colleges, and workplaces, relationships help form our sense of self as we begin to accept and adopt others’ perceptions as our own. The sociological aspect of academic persistence concerning individuals’ sense of self is compelling. On the one hand, persistence can alter how others see us as it helps us demonstrate an ‘alternative’ self to those who expressed doubt. However, conversely, persistence can be made increasingly difficult by negative appraisals by others.

The ‘organisational’ self, or how interactions with organisations form individuals’ sense of self, can be particularly impactful for academic persistence in FE. Early experiences of education, whether negative or positive, set the scene for later educational interactions. Difficult schooldays or previous college courses can lead to an expectation of difficulty at college, and vice versa. While individuals might be optimistic when returning to education, one setback can be a painful reminder of a challenging past. Structures within institutions can be influential, even when that is not their purpose. As individuals strive to persist in education, staff, other students, cultures, physical spaces, subjects, and services combine to develop students’ sense of self that either fits or does not fit the institution.

The second theme, ‘The push and pull of motivation’, reveals how individuals find and draw upon motivating factors to aid their persistence. With no overarching motivational factor, individuals look to their pasts to push them forward and away from troubling times and to their futures to provide a pull towards better experiences. Those pasts and futures, combined, help provide the necessary motivation to persist. It is clear from the study that we cannot consider the effects of students’ internal motivation on their persistence without attending to their experiences of relationships and social encounters and the organisational structures within which they study.

Individuals do not rely solely on internal, personal, or inherent motivation to persist, as we might expect from a psychological viewpoint. While they may see their motivation as purely ‘them’, motivation to persist is not purely psychological. Many have a natural determination and resilience that aids persistence, but few persist on that alone.

Instead, determination often exists not just to persist but to persist 'because of', or 'for', people to whom we are socially connected. So, motivation which may appear internal and psychological, has developed from, or is oriented towards, social interactions, but this remains concealed if we fail to consider the sociological elements of motivation. Even those whose motivation appears to be entirely personal cannot become separate from their past, present, or future. Individuals might not be aware of the role of others, their pasts, or their futures in their motivations to persist. However, reflecting on and discussing social connections, role models, inspirations and fears may help students understand and use their motivations to help them persist.

When we consider the organisational element of motivation, we see that organisations play a significant part in students' motivation to persist. Difficult earlier education experiences can provide a 'push' effect to move individuals away from negative experiences towards those that are more positive. Simultaneously, colleges, their staff, and the structures within can both support motivation to persist and diminish it. What one student perceives as motivating, another might view as discouraging, and managing these conflicting perceptions can be challenging.

The third key theme, 'The ambiguity of agency', reveals individuals' perceptions and uncertainty regarding their sense of agency. The complications arising from a lost sense of agency can impair academic persistence, but equally, the encouragement gleaned from achieving a sense of agency can enhance and support it.

Like individuals' sense of self and motivation, focusing on agency as a purely psychological construct is unhelpful when studying academic persistence. Some individuals may be more naturally agentic than others, which may link to other psychological or character traits. For example, we might consider some students as naturally conscientious and able to focus on academic tasks, and this may manifest as them appearing to take a sense of pride in or control of their studies. This sense of agency might be vital in academic persistence, and these individual and psychological elements are helpful. However, this theme highlights that agency does not occur within individuals without intervention from relationships, experiences, or circumstances. The uncertainty and questioning of agency while students attempt to persist in education demonstrates how interlinked it is in our lifeworld. Our internal sense of agency may not significantly impact academic persistence, but academic persistence might impact our sense of agency.

In contrast, we see how just as individuals questioned and scrutinised their sense of agency, they simultaneously drew attention to its social nature, reminding us that a sociological view of agency is crucial. Relationships with family, friends, and staff help shape students' sense of agency,

offering encouragement and support or posing threats to their sense of agency. Without considering the sociological nature of agency, we miss vital elements of the students' experiences.

Similarly, the sense of agency felt by students is affected by organisational structures, institutional boundaries, power structures, rules, and regulations. Students who persist in college are attempting to navigate agency uncertainty while accepting support from others without allowing that support to overtake that which they can provide for themselves. Whether it helps or hinders academic persistence, we cannot separate the sense of agency from individuals' past experiences or current circumstances – it develops, strengthens, and diminishes. Each of these changes, no matter how small, are tied up in social and organisational structures.

The final theme, 'Emotions and coping while considering withdrawal', illuminates what we know is there, but that is often hidden from view. Just as life is inherently emotional, academic persistence is no different. The emotions felt by students who have persisted are often overlooked, as even the individuals themselves attempt to move on and bury difficult feelings. However, this theme has revealed emotions that deserve attention, as they demonstrate areas of college life that can challenge, upset, and threaten, but that can often be supported or managed. As individuals battle with challenges in college, they begin to feel lost and confused.

The emotions felt by students experiencing persistence are uniquely personal, and a psychological view of emotions is helpful. Participants demonstrated the varying ways in which their emotions were perceived, felt, and actioned. Understanding their characteristics and natural dispositions helped them accept their emotions and coping strategies, but crucially, it helps us understand them.

However, while we often attribute emotions and coping to individual psychological, emotional states, these emotions can underlie complex relationships with people and societal structures and discourses. By focusing purely on the psychological element of emotion, we miss potential sociological connections. Society and relationships with others shape our responses to emotional situations and our coping strategies. This was particularly evident among the male participants, who tended to hide their emotions and attempted to bury their feelings.

Similarly, we must consider organisational structures when addressing the emotional impact of academic persistence and coping strategies. College structures may often help students who experience difficult emotions. However, from physical layouts of buildings to perceptions that only designated support staff are there to provide support, institutional structures can mask the extent of our students' emotional struggles. Only by considering our organisational structures in

conjunction with the psychological and sociological aspects of emotion will we fully support our students.

The academic persistence phenomenon is profoundly emotional and combines psychological, sociological, and organisational elements of discovering a sense of self and agency while adopting the push and pull of motivation from multiple directions. It is not something individuals 'do' and move on from; it is an experience they live through which brings together memories of their past, the conditions of their present, and their hopes for the future. It is not an individual experience; it forms part of their relationships, and their relationships form part of the experience. It is not something to support the organisation; it is something for the organisation to support.

This understanding of academic persistence developed from the detailed and interpretative analysis of individuals actively persisting in FE adds to the current literature on academic persistence and retention. The following section explores the thesis's contribution to extant literature both in the theoretical subject of retention and persistence and in the methodological approaches used in those studies.

6.4 Emotions and coping while considering withdrawal

While early studies of retention focused on attributes, predictions, reasons, and attempts to understand the concept of withdrawal, seldom considering the emotional side of withdrawal or persistence, recent studies have begun to look more closely at emotions. Still, many studies focus on prediction, using emotional intelligence and control to determine what could create a successful student. The current study moves away from this area of research to begin to understand the lived experiences and emotions of students who persist. Dealing only with students who remained in college, the study draws no comparison between the emotions of those who remain and those who withdraw. However, by beginning to understand what these students have felt throughout their studies, we might gain insight into withdrawn students' emotions.

The participants' narratives demonstrate an array of emotions that were, at times, difficult to hear. Their descriptions of how they felt and the events or issues with general wellbeing that led to or highlighted those feelings provided unique insights into colleges' requirements and sometimes-competing resources. For many participants, feelings of being lost and confused, overlooked and unimportant were constant reminders that they were a small, although integral, part of a large institution. Although this was not always the case, and some participants described gratitude for the college's attempts to support them, the stories they told regarding their worries were distressing for the individuals. For Adam, a mature student who struggled with re-entering education, the entire process of entering the unknown was complex. Adam's description

demonstrated not only his confusion around a changing world but, more specifically, how students can fear the unknown. Despite having left school many years before, he considered entering the college environment as though it was like school. His memories of beginning school returned not as feelings of excitement for what lay ahead but as '*daunting'*. Participants often backed up the confusion they felt with specific examples of times when staff gave them what they perceived as conflicting advice or unclear instructions. They described feeling caught between doing what they felt others expected of them and what they believed they should do, at times leading to arguments between staff and students or students and students. Some participants expressed challenges due to specific learning difficulties that added another layer of confusion to situations where they could not reach agreements with teaching or support staff. Their emotions were unsteady, with life's expected ups and downs seemingly more pronounced within this environment as they struggled to work within the confines of the institution while dealing with pressures of personal lives and their academic challenges, described by Alison as a *'rollercoaster all at once'*.

Despite the support offered at times to most participants, they described feeling unimportant, overlooked, and ignored. Dealing with this in their unique ways, some participants allowed those feelings to build up while others took opportunities to release their emotions. They demonstrated vastly different coping strategies, from avoidance of difficult situations to facing pressures head-on, and those strategies had emotional outcomes of their own. As one of those who faced pressures head-on, Rebecca demonstrated one of the most vivid descriptions of coping style. As someone who presented herself as typically active and outgoing, her coping style mirrored this. She reappraised her challenging situations and found that action was stress-relieving, demonstrating that, for her, an active coping style was helpful to her persistence (Lesure-Lester 2003).

Although many students may be aware that college and school offer different experiences, the initial experience has many similarities. With the institutions' sizes and physical layouts, and the new rules and processes to be adhered to, we begin to see those similarities. The new buildings and rules alone create new experiences and require much to be learned and understood, even before classes begin. Coupled with this, students take on new roles as 'students' while forging new friendships and alliances despite little knowledge of the individuals who share their classes. While this may offer excitement for some, it can be overwhelming for others, something with which Christie *et al.* (2008) agree. The process they describe as 'learning shock' was demonstrated by their participants, who spoke of the 'huge culture change' that led many participants to see their initial semester as a 'write off ' (p. 570). While their research involved students transitioning from college to university, a transition that has attracted vast amounts of

research, the experiences of the current study's participants were similar. Despite not knowing what to expect, they had imagined what they would find, yet this was not enough to set aside their fears.

For participants who felt lost and confused, the most prominent area of confusion was subject-related. A particular concern for those with learning difficulties, Stuart and Tristan offered the most explicit descriptions. Stuart's numerous stories regarding the confusion he felt centred around mixed messages from teaching and support staff, which together formed additional barriers to his learning. Already struggling with his academic ability, he described teaching staff giving him instructions that did not make sense to him as he tried to balance his understanding with that of the support staff who were there to help him. For Tristan, the confusion began with the subject matter. However, it became more embedded with the college structures as he attempted to understand the subject and how tutors delivered it. He demonstrated utter confusion at what he saw as nonsensical teaching and assessment methods which, in turn, increased his lack of understanding of the subject. Rather than improving his understanding, he became so concerned with the methods employed by staff that his attention drifted from the subject and left him feeling yet more confused. As England *et al.* (2017) report, confusion and lack of understanding are among the stressors leading to anxiety and, potentially, withdrawal.

Covington's need achievement theory (1992, in Simons *et al.* 1999) goes some way to addressing the struggles felt by some of the participants. Stuart and Graham, who often assumed that they would be unable to complete work without substantial support, became defensive in their words and actions. They dismissed the staff as unhelpful, and Stuart, in particular, grew angry and was prone to outbursts. Both explained how hard they were working and were keen to show how much additional effort they exerted to avoid failure. As Covington explains, however, this extra effort may not always lead to success. The extra effort, which sometimes still leads to failure, can negatively affect emotions for those students. Sam, in contrast, demonstrates a possible fear of failure through her lack of effort. Saving herself from the disappointment of poor outcomes based on effort, she self-preserves by avoiding college.

England *et al.*'s research also identified student concerns of looking incapable in front of others as impacting anxiety (and therefore, potentially, persistence). The current study found similar feelings among participants that, while not necessarily linked explicitly to anxiety, did cause emotional upset. Graham repeatedly reminded me that he was not *'daft'* and explained how he felt others were speaking a different language. Struggling to keep up in class, feeling out of his depth and as though he were less capable than his peers who could understand this other '*language'*, Graham's difficulty with words was linked to his dyslexia. He had, however, begun to feel so insecure in his abilities at this point that he was beginning to reveal how uncomfortable

he felt in a world where others did not share his difficulty. Vosloo and Blignaut (2010, p. 4) reported a similar concern in their study of access students entering mainstream programmes, in which participant narratives described *'feeling stupid'* and not wanting to let others down.

For some participants, worries about their ability and the stresses of academic challenges and personal situations brought feelings of anxiety. While several participants disclosed mental health concerns, others felt anxious but not at clinical levels. Chris spoke explicitly about anxiety, yet he did not mention anxiety when initially disclosing his mental health difficulties. His description of feeling anxious on his first day of college was overwhelming, to the point that he was close to withdrawing. Chris's anxiety was like that described by England *et al.*, as he described fear of being judged by other students whom he worried would consider him too old to join the course. They suggest that this type of anxiety, which they term 'evaluation anxiety', can be based on either real or imagined situations. For Chris, the evaluation anxiety he suffered may have felt real, but its basis was imagined. He assumed he would be seen as too old by his classmates, yet he had no evidence that this would be the case. However, the imagined situation was so severe that it threatened his future studies. Throughout Chris's interview, it became clear that he had settled into college well, and he had been able to use his mature status to his advantage in some areas. This outcome does not lessen the extent of the anxiety he felt at the time, but it perhaps points to his overwhelming sense of fear of the unknown. So great was his fear of the unknown, that Chris imagined a scenario in which he filled the unknown gaps with negative expectations.

While Rebecca did not speak specifically about anxiety, her fears and anxiety came through in her descriptions of feeling less able than others. Like Graham and Chris, Rebecca was concerned that others would look upon her as incapable. Her past experiences of bullying and the difficulties she associated with academic work led her to believe others evaluated her. On several occasions, Rebecca spoke of feeling under immense stress and pressure. While she fought against her challenges and was eventually able to complete her course, Rebecca's sense of anxiety was beginning, at points, to undermine her ability. For Rebecca, the anxiety we accept as helpful and potentially able to help push us towards our goals had become overwhelming and threatening to her studies. Rebecca's stress and anxiety came from academic difficulty. Combined with previous experiences of being bullied and the organisation's failure, in her view, to provide the necessary support, her academic difficulty worked against her to create an uncomfortable situation. Rebecca began to feel the emotional side-effects of the situation and believe that she was at the heart of the problem. In attempting to make sense of her experience, she blamed herself and her emotions.

Whether relating to specific support measures, in-class activities, or the administrative areas of the college, there were instances in the current study when participants perceived themselves as overlooked and unimportant. From Rebecca, whose tutors told her she had '*slipped through their net*', to Adam for whom an administrative error resulted in his exclusion from an activity, the emotional impact of this was hard to endure. Adam, when describing the experience, was openly upset by the situation. He explained how he *'felt forgotten about'* and as though he did not matter. For Adam, who had already struggled to adapt to his new life in college as he felt 'different' to other students, the college's oversight increased this feeling of being an outsider. It reiterated his feelings of difference and served as a reminder of his insignificant status as a small part of a large institution. According to Hensley and Kinser (2001, p. 93), Adam's experience is far from unique. Their study, which looked at the tenacity of adult learners, reported similar participant descriptions. Their participants described feeling 'lost in the crowd' and as though staff 'didn't care', which, although not exact replicas of the current study's participant narratives, certainly echo some of their sentiment. In many of these cases, staff may not have *'forgotten about'* the students, and in Adam's case, we cannot ascertain the underlying reasons for the situation arising.

Despite this, however, we must consider the effect of situations like these on students' emotions. Adam reveals in his description that he may have believed staff did not forget about him but that this is how he *'felt'*. Whether Adam was aware that this 'feeling' was a feeling rather than a fact is unclear; however, ignoring those feelings could be problematic. Students may often be good at hiding their emotions, and this could have negative consequences for students and colleges, but uncovering their feelings can be difficult. Relatively few studies of persistence have attempted to uncover students' emotions, but one that did so using drawings revealed the emotional 'rollercoaster' often described by students. Everett's (2019) study of the first-year experience highlighted the expectations and realities of this experience, and the findings echoed some of the narratives from the current study. Everett's participants described expectations of optimism, straightforward paths, good grades, and friendships, punctuated by worries and fear. However, the realities they described were very different. In place of straight paths were winding roads and rollercoasters, and challenges replaced successes. While we might expect some problems to interrupt all student journeys, their unpreparedness for the shock of reality is concerning. Like Everett's participants, the students in the current study navigated these realities to succeed in persisting, but this will not be the case for some. As Hensley and Kinser (2001) point out, while we often refer to our non-traditional students as 'at-risk', before aligning them with interventions and offering support, 'the traditional undergraduate student … [is] a myth' (p. 6), and those students should be redefined as 'tenacious persisters'.

The current study revealed emotions that did not depend on gender, age, or specific experience; regardless of the participant, the emotions were worryingly similar. The overwhelming feeling of bewilderment and feeling lost in an unknown place where they believed they were unimportant points to students who felt out of place and scared. Those feelings are likely to have contributed to their thoughts of withdrawal. The courage they demonstrated to persist despite such uncomfortable feelings is a testament to their support from family, friends, and staff and the participants' determination and resilience. The similarities between their coping strategies were also striking; however, there was a clear difference between how male and female participants expressed their emotions. While female participants typically sought support and asked for guidance from family, friends, and staff, male participants were less inclined to seek support. Instead, they demonstrated extreme reactions, either remaining silent about their worries or displaying anger or frustration by punching, shouting, or disobeying rules. While the current study has no evidence to support any gender divide, this may suggest an area for future research within colleges.

7.2 Contribution of the research

This thesis originated from a research interest in student retention. However, the plethora of literature arising from eight decades of scholarly research led me to focus on what I believe is missing from the area. The literature review in Chapter Two demonstrates the abundance of research and the almost unwavering attention paid to causes and solutions for what we typically see as a 'problem' occurring in HE. In contrast, research concerning FE students is minimal. Furthermore, relatively few studies attempt to understand the experience of those who either withdraw or are 'retained'. As a result, the current literature misses the voice, and therefore the richness, of these students and their experiences. This study has attempted to contribute to two areas of retention research: its methodology, and our understanding of the subject's theory. This section outlines how the thesis contributes to both.

IPA is a relatively new methodology that is rarely, although increasingly, used in education research. As a branch of phenomenology, it is concerned with the lived experience of those under study. The lived experience is difficult to unpick and requires us to pay close attention to the voices of those whose experiences are of interest. IPA, and its focus on getting as close to the experience as possible through open discussion and detailed examination of those discussions, helps us enter the participants' lifeworld to hear their experiences in detail and capture the essence of the experience. IPA's rise in popularity among education researchers has not yet reached Scottish FE. However, this thesis demonstrates the value of such an approach to the study of FE students' experience. Its focus on individual experiences has ensured the capture of deep, rich detail, and the participants' voices remain clear following interpretation. IPA, and this thesis, gives us a foothold in understanding the experiences of FE students who have experienced the phenomenon of academic persistence.

The study is exploratory. It has opened areas of methodology not typically used in retention research and, in doing so, has found common features among participants' experiences. It does not search for patterns yet found key themes that crossed multiple cases. Unlike statistical studies, it took those commonalities and attempted to understand their meanings while maintaining the participants' authentic voices and individual meanings. It also openly shares the experiences which do not 'fit' with the 'norm'. By highlighting those areas of divergence, we can begin to see how individuals experience similar situations differently.

The study does not disagree with earlier findings that students' sense of self and agency, motivation and emotions are crucial to their persistence. However, it highlights the importance of understanding these theories not as separate or distinct but as crossing the boundaries of psychological, sociological, and organisational theories. It opens for discussion the nuances of

the academic persistence experience and reveals the complexity of human experience by harnessing individual experiences, commonalities, and differences.

Finally, it draws attention to the importance of others in the academic persistence phenomenon. It shows that persisting in education is not a solitary experience; instead, it is an experience that involves, relies upon, and impacts friends, families, and institutions, along with the individuals themselves. The research provides a fuller understanding by drawing upon the relationships and connections between the individuals and their networks. It encourages us to use those networks to support FE students better as they endeavour to persist.

7.3 Implications for professional practice

The main aim of the current study is to understand the lived experience of academic persistence. In doing so, several themes have been developed and outlined in the previous chapters. However, the findings must help elucidate implications for professional practice to help guide those working in FE, whether from an organisational, teaching, or support standpoint. This section uses the themes identified to discuss those implications and in doing so offers a response to the third research question. Additionally, this section also offers areas for future research within FE colleges.

'I'm not what I thought I was': a disrupted sense of self

Accessing a college course, regardless of level, can be daunting. It often represents a new chapter in a person's life; for some, it follows a school leave, while for others, it signals a career change. For many, it is the first stage in an educational journey that they have selected. This new and unfamiliar territory presents opportunities, but with those opportunities can come potential threats to what is 'known' about oneself.

The sudden disruption to individuals' sense of self can, for some, be welcome, particularly when past experiences have been negative and when others have imposed prior identities during early educational experiences. The opportunity to revisit negative preconceptions and uncover a greater sense of self-worth can highlight previously hidden psychological and academic strengths. It can, however, pose challenges that individuals do not feel ready to tackle. In contrast, those who encountered success and praise in their earlier lives can find that negative college experiences knock their confidence and diminish their sense of self-worth. Participants' experiences uncovered the magnitude with which their sense of self was crucial to their persistence in college and how they saw themselves concerning their institution and society.

For those whose educational journeys followed a career or other life change (such as raising children), there were significant changes to their known selves. The need to fit into a new, unknown organisation, in which they were the learner, meant a shift in their sense of self from someone who knows to someone who is there to learn. While participants were ready to embrace this change, their challenges made them carefully consider this new sense of self. They no longer saw themselves as responsible, as they were no longer in any position of authority. Colleges, in which mature students account for 44% of the population (Colleges Scotland 2020), deal with individuals who often have distinct views of who they are. They believe that they know their strengths and weaknesses, likes and dislikes, and have personal life experience that no staff share. Their experience is unique and has helped build and shape the person presenting themselves as a student. Younger students, whose life experience has been shorter, may have a similar sense of self. While they may still be figuring out their skills and qualities, they are not dissimilar to our mature students in many ways. Unlike our mature students, the experiences that are fresh in their minds might link more closely to schooldays than to work or childcare, but their experiences are unique to them and have influenced their sense of self and the person they present to the college.

The disruption to students' sense of self suggests colleges are not simply providers of education. For many, they provide the impetus to rethink what is 'known'. They can highlight areas of strength and weakness and provide encouragement and support to those who are struggling. Our students' sense of self may change throughout the year, and, for some, this will be unexpected and troubling. Colleges can support that change; they can highlight it when it seems unnoticed and encourage it when it prompts questions. As Monk-Morgan suggests, 'we don't have to hold their hands, but we have to walk beside them' (cited in Whitley *et al.* 2018, p. 30).

The participants have highlighted how complex and nuanced their steps into education can be, leaving behind careers, families, and lifestyles, all of which are familiar and many of which are comfortable. Their experiences remind us of their individuality and suggest that, in some cases, FE organisations pay little attention to the individual circumstances in which students find themselves. In turn, they show the potential for deeper understanding and increasingly positive outcomes where individuals' experiences are respected, and students are encouraged to consider, share, and reflect on those experiences.

'Just getting on with it': the push and pull of motivation

Researchers and educators have long upheld the view that motivation is paramount to persistence. Students themselves are often aware of the link between motivation and course completion, and they do, at times, quickly realise that their lack of motivation can cause difficulty. Perhaps less widely understood is the complex array of motivational factors in students' lives and how they

manifest during college. Whether categorised as internal or external, motivation can disrupt or enhance a student's journey. This categorisation can be helpful, particularly when supporting students to consider their next steps regarding studying or career options. It can, however, belie the complexity of motivation, its origins, its fluctuations, and how individuals perceive and action it.

Participants showed that motivation is seldom 'one-sided'. While previous experiences push them towards the future and away from the past, encourage them to try harder, prove others wrong, and let go of earlier failings, future expectations and hopes motivate them by pulling them through difficult times, away from the past towards their futures. This combination of factors and the potential for the push and pull of motivation to work together may provide opportunities for colleges to acknowledge students' difficult experiences in positive ways.

The perceived influence of others on participants' motivation could open further possibilities for colleges. While it seems unlikely that any student is ever devoid of influence from others entirely, some participants perceived no influence from others whatsoever. In contrast, others perceived a complete lack of self-motivation and instead relied wholeheartedly on others. In no instance did a participant openly acknowledge or recognise the synergy between their motivation and others. This finding suggests that students are somewhat unaware of colleges' attempts to motivate their students through collaboration. Support staff often took centre stage, demonstrating a perceived divide between teaching and support staff; where one presents challenges, the other presents opportunities, and where one offers indifference, the other offers care. Support should be institution-wide, with designated and specialist support departments providing 'value-added' services that go 'over and above what should already be provided through faculties' (Nakata *et al.* 2019, p. 3). However, participants' references to teaching or support staff as parts of different and discrete services suggest a divide, whether real or imagined. Increased and more obvious partnership working could overcome the perceived divide and encourage students to seek support. In turn, this could develop a motivational 'pull' from both sides.

Understanding students' motivation to study is often one of the first tasks for staff, expected in an application form and asked during an interview. It may even form parts of early class discussions. 'What motivates you to study X?' is a question that could require one short answer, with responses such as 'I want to work as an X', 'I like X', or 'I've grown up around X'. However, such an answer may not reveal their underlying motivation, instead indicating one reason they are interested in their chosen subject. There is far more to the motivation required to demonstrate academic persistence than this, yet we often fail to acknowledge it. Participants in this study highlighted this complexity of motivation and provided opportunities for deeper

understanding. In doing so, their experiences suggest colleges must delve deeper into students' motivations, while bearing in mind that motivation to persist is ongoing, ever-changing, multi-faceted, and often requires support.

'Did I just decide myself?' The ambiguity of agency

The push and pull of motivation can be interconnected and challenging for students to separate and understand; their sense of agency is no different. There is often an understanding, even a requirement, that students 'take control of' or 'assume responsibility for' their studies. However, while we expect our students to understand and accept this, we often fail to acknowledge that it can feel overwhelming and impossible in some cases. There may be the assumption that support will naturally continue throughout their educational journey for those accustomed to support in their personal or educational lives. However, this will not necessarily be the case (e.g., if formal support packages are unavailable, application forms are incomplete, college processes do not support the transfer of necessary information). For those students, there is an urgent need for colleges to address data sharing and to make adjustments. Transitions from school or other colleges present opportunities to share relevant and helpful information to establish early support arrangements and a smooth transition from one institution to another. Internal systems should have the potential to spot indicators of students requiring additional support. However, support systems must consider all areas of a student's life, not just their academic situation. Students 'flagged' for support should see support not as 'being done to' but as 'in conjunction with' them.

Participants in this study were unclear on matters of agency, ranging from perceived non-existence of control to one of complete control. There was considerable confusion among participants who shifted between relinquishing any form of control over their studies, to demonstrating control through periods of resistance. The balance between independence and support is consistently delicate, and that balance varies on an individual basis. For some, independent thought in the early stages of FE studies will prove daunting and, potentially, too demanding. Others will relish the opportunity. Where a student requires support, the balancing act becomes increasingly precarious. When a student becomes unable or unwilling to demonstrate any form of control, any balance has gone.

The participants' experiences suggest that there are opportunities to support and help increase their sense of agency when they are struggling. Both teaching and support staff, as well as students themselves, have a part to play. Participants were clear that, in some instances, they perceived subjects were too demanding, irrelevant, unclear. While perhaps not shared by all students, this view suggests that potential improvements are needed in lessons and curricula. It suggests that teaching staff could benefit from embracing co-design of curricula and individual

lessons in setting course and lesson plans, with feedback from students acknowledged and practised. Encouraging students to be part of these processes may provide opportunities for colleges to reinvigorate their teaching while students can begin to feel a valued part of the organisation. This potential is not limited to teaching staff; while colleges seek feedback on support services from students, it is often informal.

Addressing students' perceptions of agency is complex and cannot be done in isolation. Participants in this study demonstrated a need to feel in control but not necessarily to have control, highlighting that perception rather than actuality is important. Recent research on feedback suggests that it should be open, transparent, and used to develop dialogue if delivered effectively. By encouraging dialogue between staff and students, increasing awareness of students' backgrounds and challenges, and providing feedback upon which students can build, our power structures and students' perceptions of agency could alter (Bennett and Folley 2020; Francis *et al.* 2019).

'What am I doing here?' Emotions and coping while considering withdrawal

Participants expressed their emotions candidly, with several becoming tearful during interviews. From excitement to anger, and from relief to anguish, their emotions were turbulent and troubling. Such emotions may not be surprising, given the topic under study, but how those emotions were experienced and dealt with highlighted areas of concern. While initiatives to widen participation and improve prospective students' access to college are welcome, preparing students for college is only part of the picture; students may be 'college-ready', but colleges must be 'student-ready' (Whitley *et al.* 2018, p. 29).

Outbursts of anger or upset suggest difficulty controlling or dealing with emotions. While colleges may not consider emotions and coping strategies within their remit, it is clear from the narratives that outbursts will occur on our campuses. Participants demonstrated a desire to 'hide' those outbursts; they did not generally want to be seen or heard while they were emotional. In some cases, this led to participants walking out, storming off, punching walls, or hiding in support offices, suggesting a need for outlets designed for emotional expression. Recent introductions of Mental Health Counsellors to colleges in Scotland suggest that the Government is now targeting this area for support. This initiative, along with the increase of Mental Health First Aiders in education, is welcome. However, for those who, like some participants, are struggling with emotions but not prone to mental ill-health, further support may be needed.

The experiences shared as part of this study made clear the role of Student Support in helping students with their emotions. Seldom, if ever, were teaching staff reported to be involved in

calming down or comforting a participant. This point, again, suggests a divide, but it is unclear from where this divide originates. The perceived divide may have occurred naturally, as students may be inclined to discuss more personal issues with those not responsible for their academic work. Alternatively, it may be an imposition of staff and organisational structures. By segregating Support from Academic and simultaneously diminishing the pastoral support required of teaching staff, students see unambiguous support. However, the participants' experiences and desire to hide their emotional states from teaching staff and other students suggest that this may be preventing our students from opening up and sharing their feelings other than in parts of the college deemed responsible for those emotions. Colleges must recognise that while specialist pastoral and academic support can be 'separated', it must remain 'integrated' (Nakata *et al.* 2019).

Participants described experiences that left them feeling lost, confused, overlooked, and unimportant. For some, those feelings were fleeting, but for others they acted as a constant threat to their persistence. Despite the similarity of the emotions described among participants, their coping strategies appeared divided and gender specific. While this study has no basis in gender theory, the difference between the female and male participants' perceived coping strategies was interesting. Female participants generally described reaching out for help through conversations with friends, family, and staff. At the same time, males reacted by refusal to ask for help or with outbursts of anger and frustration. There is no shortage of research on gender differences in coping strategies (see, for example, Anbumalar *et al.* 2017; Cabras and Mondo 2018), but conclusions differ. The reasons underlying the differences in coping strategies among the participants in this study are unclear, but they may impact colleges' support mechanisms and are worth further investigation.

Recommendations for practice

The implications discussed above provide reasons for change within FE environments. However, they should not be seen as relevant only to FE. While this study has focussed on FE, the practical implications have the potential to bring about change in all education and training environments, including Schools, Higher Education, Vocational Education and Training, and Professional Learning in sectors such as Health Services. No two learning experiences are the same, but academic persistence is exhibited regardless of institution or context. The following recommendations for practice can, therefore, be applied to support academic persistence within any learning environment:

- As learners embark on a new area of study or encounter challenges during their education and training, they may believe they are unprepared or incapable of success. Learners will

draw upon their earlier experiences of education to help them understand their experiences. We can support learners to examine, make sense of, and challenge their preconceptions through open and meaningful discussion.

- Returning to study following a break can give rise to conflicting identities. Those who have previously held a position of authority (e.g., as a professional, a caregiver) may find themselves in unfamiliar territory, and this can be disarming and encourage passivity. We can encourage learners to reflect on, use and adapt their skills and expertise in new ways to support their learning.

- Motivation can fade as challenges appear. When learners perceive obstacles as insurmountable, motivation to try can seemingly disappear. However, motivation to persist seldom has one origin, and we can support learners to consider their motivations fully and encourage them to engage with all of their sources of motivation simultaneously.

- Support services and academic subjects can appear divided and discrete. When learners require support, they are inclined and encouraged to reach out to designated support staff, but this can emphasise unnecessarily perceived divisions. Both support and academic staff can challenge this perception by recognising support as starting within faculties and reaching out for value-added and specific support.

- Learners can face delayed and complex support mechanisms. When relevant support information is not shared between previous institutions or internal departments, learners are disadvantaged. Admissions and support services can pre-empt unnecessary delays and information gaps through early discussions and electronic data-sharing with other institutions and between departments.

- Support and teaching can appear 'done to' learners. When learners perceive a lack of involvement in how they are supported and taught, they can feel disconnected and insignificant. Both support and academic staff can challenge this perception by working with learners to co-design aspects of the curriculum, seeking and, importantly, acting on learner feedback.

- Learners can be reluctant to express their emotions openly. When learners feel challenged by either personal or academic experiences, they can struggle to deal with their emotions alone. We can support our learners with emotional expression by considering the impact of all areas of the learning environment and encouraging all staff to reach out to learners with confidence.

These recommendations originate from within the participants' open and frank discussions. While there are undoubtedly areas of excellent practice occurring in all areas of Scottish colleges, the participants' descriptions were full and clear, and demonstrated some significant challenges faced by learners. Learners will not always succeed with their academic goals, but we can and must support them to openly share their lived experiences with us in order that we can continue to improve for our students. The participants in this study have made clear how much we can learn if we simply listen.

7.4 Recommendations for further study

The exploratory nature of this study provides several avenues for further research. While academic persistence research is prolific, phenomenological research of the subject is lacking. Studies that describe and analyse withdrawal statistics track 'at-risk' students, attempt to predict withdrawal, promote interest in academic persistence, and provide valuable data for understanding the patterns and extent of withdrawal. However, they present an incomplete picture. While they can signal 'gaps', they cannot explain how and why strategies are or are not successful (Nakata *et al.* 2019). Regardless of their completion or withdrawal, students are human beings first and foremost, socially, emotionally, and culturally embedded within their lifeworld, and no statistic can reveal human experience.

Further qualitative studies of academic persistence, similar to the current study, would be helpful to explore the lived experience of students in other colleges. Mixed-methods studies generating data that confirms the extent of students who have considered withdrawing and uncover the lived experience of homogenous persisting groups would encourage the development of systematic, rich data for the FE population. For example, studies relating to gender-specific groups may clarify the apparent gender divide noted in the current study. While studies relating to carers and families of those with learning disabilities are extensive, little research seeks to give voice to those experiencing such disabilities first-hand (Larkin *et al.* 2019). A study relating to disability-specific or age-specific groups may be helpful for college learning support departments.

An IPA project exploring the relationship between classroom dynamics and academic persistence may help uncover the nuances of academic subjects and student demographics within learning environments. Classroom dynamics were noted within the current study but did not emerge as a key theme, but further exploration would be interesting.

An IPA study of college staff who have experienced supporting persisting students would add further insight into the lived experience of academic persistence. IPA research recognises that phenomena are 'located within the accounts of other people who belong to the "lived world" of

the person' (Larkin *et al.* 2019, p. 182). Therefore, teaching and support staff could share their experiences, and understanding the effects of student difficulty and persistence on staff might help other staff and their students in future. The realisation that staff are invested in students, for example, may support future students facing persistence challenges. It may also be interesting to engage college management in a similar study to establish their lived experience of managing staff and students in an environment where they rely on students to exhibit academic persistence, and on staff to support that persistence for financial and organisational success.

IPA studies are beginning to embrace new and innovative methods, and while the current study retained a traditional approach of one-to-one interviewing, further studies could introduce additional elements. For example, drawings, observations, and focus groups may offer further insight into the lived experience and help put research participants at ease with the research process.

Published research within colleges may be lacking, but there are opportunities to build high-quality and high-impact resources from the unpublished work that is already occurring. In addition, publishing those resources may encourage more college staff to engage with research. The College Development Network's new Research and Enhancement Centre and the College Action Inquiry Research Network Journal are just two available opportunities. Academic persistence is one of many areas that would benefit from these opportunities, and the current study provides a starting point, both theoretically and methodologically, for further studies within FE.

By generating a variety of evidence and improving our understanding of the lived experience of academic persistence from students, staff, and organisations, we will begin to create a fuller picture of the experience, which we can then use to inform professional practice.

7.5 Concluding remarks and reflections

The participants who took part in this study are evidence of academic persistence. Introducing the thesis, I positioned myself as someone with first-hand 'experience' of academic persistence. However, my experience was of HE, and my experience was quite unlike those in this study. Throughout this study, therefore, I have been an 'outsider'; however, I have been an 'outsider-with-knowledge'. I cannot change my experience of being a student, lecturer, or member of support staff. As we carry out IPA studies, we are reminded of our interpretative role and our inability to cast aside our preconceptions fully. As such, we must reflect on our thoughts, preconceptions, morals, and experiences to avoid camouflaging our participants' experiences with our own. For me, this involved journal and blog entries, a selection of which I have included in Appendix C. I made most of my blog entries during the early stages of the PhD, and most of

my journal entries before and during the interview process, but I maintained the journal throughout the project.

Nearing the project's end, returning to look through my earlier reflections reminds me of some of my biggest challenges throughout the project. I am surprised to see how closely they relate to some of the key themes within the project. For example, I agonised over my role as a researcher or teacher. At times my 'sense of self' felt compromised by the study, particularly as I questioned whether to reveal my profession to participants. While researching, working, and studying, I had mixed roles to fulfil, and one did not always accommodate the other perfectly. I felt the same push and pull of motivation that my participants felt, often stemming from relationships. I do not have a clear answer to the question 'what motivates you to complete a PhD?'; however, I have positive past educational experiences (and family) to give me an encouraging push forward when I need it, and the pull of potential to look back and say, 'I did it'. Finally, I agree with the participants that studying can feel like an emotional rollercoaster, albeit in my reflections, I compared it to a journey in a golf buggy.

While no two experiences will ever be identical, the current study identifies consistencies in the experience of academic persistence, regardless of individual situations. The experience of persisting on an FE course despite difficulties presents challenges and opportunities. Given time to adjust and a space in which they could think, participants have, at times, been able to shed preconceived ideas and embrace their potential. Not 'fitting in' became an opportunity to create new social groups, and negative past experiences became the foundations for building new relationships. At the same time, the emotional turbulence of struggling at college provided opportunities to test those relationships. Over time, and with support, participants' sense of self that was previously restraining and ineffectual became liberating and powerful. The challenges still exist, and the end of the academic year may be unlikely to conquer all negative experiences. However, we should celebrate the persistence exhibited by all those who have felt challenged.

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Appendices

Appendix A – SFC Full-time FE Student Withdrawal Data

Year	2009/10	2010/11	2011/12	2012/13	2013/14	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20
No. of enrolments	51410	51861	52090	48754	51025	50924	49954	50086	49366	47114	45876
Successful completions (%)	60.00	62.00	64.00	65.40	66.00	64.00	65.50	65.30	66.10	65.20	65.70
Total completions (%)	72.00	73.00	75.00	76.70	77.40	74.60	74.50	74.90	74.90	75.30	78.80
Early withdrawals (%)	10.00	10.00	9.00	8.70	7.80	8.60	9.00	9.00	9.00	8.70	8.70
Other withdrawals (%)	18.00	17.00	16.00	14.60	14.80	16.80	16.50	16.10	16.10	16.00	12.40
Total withdrawals (%)	**28.00**	**27.00**	**25.00**	**23.30**	**22.60**	**25.40**	**25.50**	**25.10**	**25.10**	**24.70**	**21.20**

Figure 26 - Full-time FE student data, 2009/10 – 2019/20

(SFC 2011, 2012, 2021b, 2014, 2015, 2016a, 2016b, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020a)

Appendix B – Informed Consent Agreement

Please read this consent agreement carefully before you decide to participate in the study.

Purpose of the research study: The purpose of the study is to critically examine how students experience academic persistence. It aims to explore the thought processes and reasoning of students, the meanings they attach to their experiences and the understandings they create of the world around them. It is hoped that this enhanced understanding will help inform our professional practice in supporting future students who are considering withdrawal.

What you will do in the study: During the study, you will be invited to take part in semi-structured interviews. The number of interviews will be flexible and largely determined by you, the participant. It is expected, however, that you will be asked to participate in one to two interviews throughout the academic year.

You will be asked to record any events or thoughts you consider important to your experience in an online diary that will be seen by the researcher. The diary entries will be used as prompts during the interviews.

During the interviews, you will be asked to talk about your experiences of studying, considering withdrawal and persistence, including thoughts relating to personal and academic issues that may have had any influence on your experience. You may choose to skip any questions or withhold personal details at any time, and you may request that the interview is stopped at any point. The interviews will be recorded and later transcribed, and parts of those transcriptions may be published as part of the final project.

You will also be asked to bring photographs of anything you consider relevant or important to your experience. These photographs will be used to facilitate discussion, and a copy of them will be taken for future reference. They are not expected to be included in any published work, however, if the need arises for these to be included in any publication your signed consent will be requested.

Time required: The study is expected to require between 2 and 4 hours of your time. Each interview is expected to last around an hour, but there is a degree of flexibility to not detract

from your studies. The number of interviews, and therefore the time expected, will be clarified following the first interview. Interviews can be conducted at a time suitable for you, including evenings and weekends.

Risks: There are no anticipated risks in this study. If you feel uncomfortable during any of the interviews, however, you may choose to skip questions, have the recorder switched off, or to suspend the interview.

Benefits: There are no direct benefits to you for participating in this research study. The study should, however, help us understand how students experience academic persistence and allow us to better support future students who are considering withdrawal.

Confidentiality: Your data will remain private and confidential. Your information will be assigned a code number, and an anonymization log will be used. The list connecting your name to the code number and anonymization log will be securely stored. All interviews will be recorded and later transcribed, and the recordings and transcriptions will be stored securely on the University of Stirling's network. The data will be backed up to an encrypted storage device which will be stored securely in a locked cabinet. Any printed transcriptions will be stored in a locked cabinet. Your data will be anonymized which means your name will not be linked to the data. Data that could otherwise indirectly identify you as a participant, such as age, address and course will be altered or made vague (see examples below) to retain confidentiality:

Original	**Changed to**
John (real name)	Peter (pseudonym)
Age 20	Aged between 16 and 24
Residing in Cupar	Residing in Scotland
20th June	June
Studying NC Sport and Fitness	Studying within the subject area of Sport and Tourism

Following the study, your data will be destroyed in accordance with confidential waste procedures for the college. This will involve the destruction of any recordings, photographic evidence and paper documentation other than that which is to be included for publication in the final project paper/thesis.

Voluntary participation: Your participation in the study is completely voluntary. Your access to academic support and guidance will not be affected by your participation, or otherwise, in the study.

Right to withdraw from the study: You have the right to withdraw during the study at any time, and up to one month after you have completed the study you may request your data are withdrawn and destroyed, without penalty. If you choose to withdraw, any recordings, photographic evidence and paper documentation will be destroyed unless you formally agree that we may continue to use your data.

How to withdraw from the study: Should you wish to withdraw at any point, please contact the lead researcher. Contact details are provided below. If you choose to withdraw from the study during an interview, please tell the researcher to stop the interview and explain that you wish to withdraw. There is no penalty for withdrawing.

Payment: You will receive no payment for participating in the study.

If you have questions about the study, contact:

Nikki McIntosh (Lead Researcher)
c/o Kevin Brosnan
Education
RG Beaumont Building
University of Stirling
Telephone: [redacted]
Email address: nicola.mcintosh@stir.ac.uk

Dr Kevin Brosnan (Supervisor)
Education
RG Beaumont Building
University of Stirling
Telephone: [redacted]
Email address: k.d.r.brosnan@stir.ac.uk

Dr Richard Dockrell (Supervisor and Head of Education Studies)
Education
RG Beaumont Building
University of Stirling
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Email address: r.b.dockrell@stir.ac.uk

Professor Alison Bowes (Dean of faculty, Social Sciences)
Faculty of Social Sciences
Room 3S26, Colin Bell Building
University of Stirling
Telephone: [redacted]
Email address: a.m.bowes@stir.ac.uk

In the event of a complaint regarding the interview, please contact the project supervisors named above.

Research Project Working Title – Academic Persistence in Further Education

Participant Number ☐

	Initials
I confirm that I have read and understood the informed consent form explaining the research project and that I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the project.	
I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time during the study and to withdraw my data within one month of completing the study without giving a reason, and without any penalty.	
I understand that my responses will be kept anonymous and I give permission for members of the research team to have access to my anonymised responses.	
I consent to being audio recorded.	
I understand how audio recordings will be used in the research outputs.	
I am aware that I will not be named in the research outputs but that I could be identified by people I know through the stories I tell.	
I give permission to be quoted directly in the research publication against a pseudonym.	
I consent to digital copies of my photographs being retained and understand how they will be used in the research outputs.	
I understand that my General Practitioner (GP) will not be informed about my participation in this study. However, if the researcher has any concerns regarding information about me I will be advised to contact my GP.	
I agree to take part in this study	

By signing this document you are accepting that your data will be confidential. In normal circumstances, confidentiality will be respected at all times. The exceptions to this would be:

- **If the researcher considers that you are a danger to yourself or others**
- **If children under the age of 16 appear to be at risk**
- **If there is a need to protect an adult at risk**
- **If the researcher is called upon in legal circumstances to divulge information**
- **If you agree to others being told**

Name of Participant: _____
Signature: _____
Date: _____

Name of Researcher: _____
Signature: _____
Date: _____

You will receive a copy of this form for your records.

Appendix C – Reflective Journal

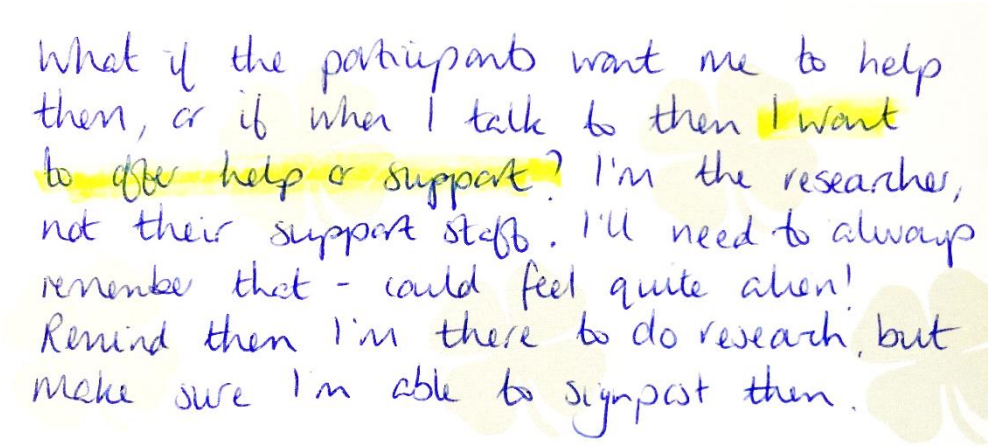

Figure 27 - Pre-research journal, date unknown

This worry became 'real' during an interview on 23rd March 2018, when a participant described his difficulty with writing:

> *Because I I I [sigh]…cos I get people trying to tell me how to spell…eh…and I'm going…you know it's…see if I see if there was a a a thingmibob I could talk to into something like [pointing at the computer] that, it it would be so much easier, and it could talk back to me, that'd make that'd make a big difference for a dyslexic folk Nikki ken? (Graham)*

An extract from a journal entry made on the interview day shows my discomfort with the situation. I contacted my supervisors for support and to seek confirmation that what I planned to do was appropriate in the situation. I advised the participant to contact his Student Support department to ask what assistive technology was available on his campus.

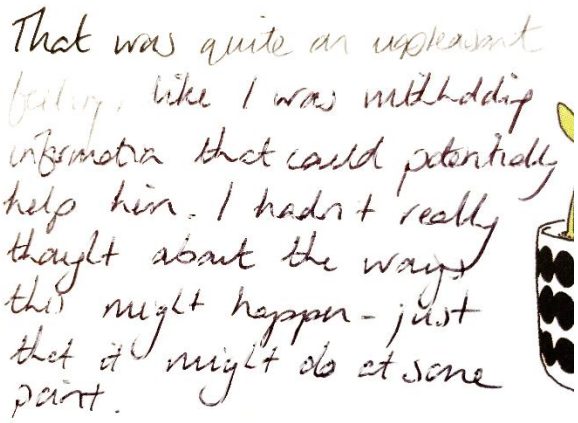

Figure 28 - Research journal, 23rd March 2018

The following excerpts show my questioning around when to begin analysis. I could see benefits in analysing interviews as soon as I had completed their transcription to maintain my closeness to the participant and their experiences. However, on further consideration, I realised this was unachievable for all participants as I had interviews within days of one another. I had to carefully consider how analysis of one transcript would impact the analysis of another, but this would be the case regardless of when each was analysed.

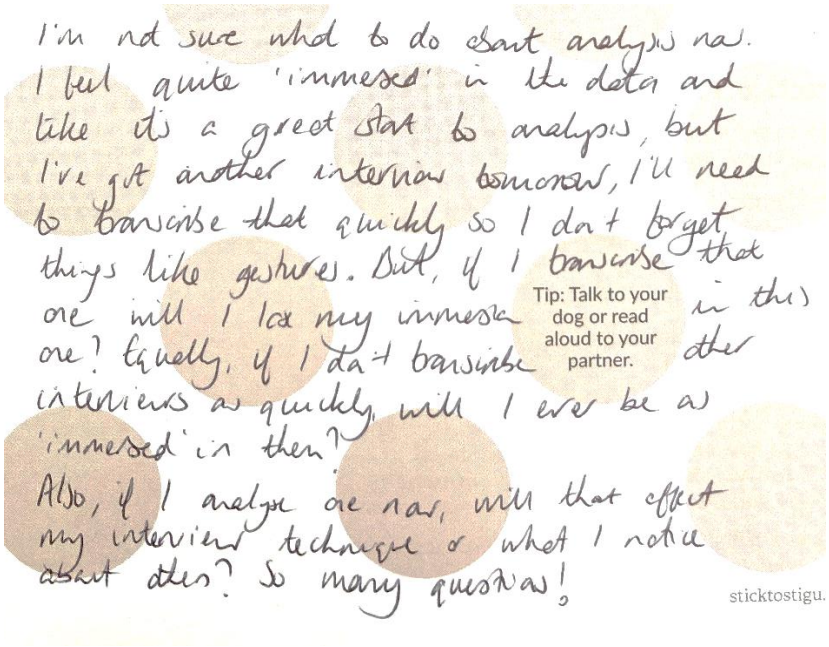

Figure 29 - Research journal, 22nd March 2018

I made the following extract during the initial analysis stage. It shows how I was seeing my beliefs interfering with the participant's voice. At the same time, I was beginning to see the benefit of analysing the transcripts in various stages as it helped me move from a superficial understanding of participants' experiences to a deeper understanding:

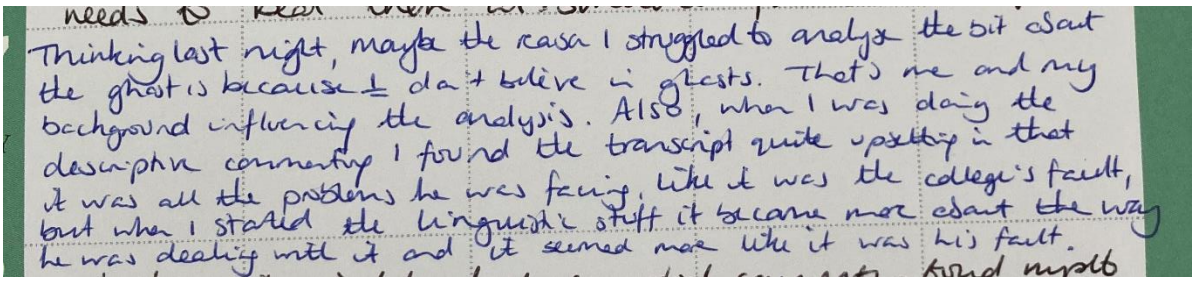

Figure 30 - Research journal, 27th June 2018

The final excerpt in this Appendix is from my blog. I intended my blog to be an 'accountability partner' as I struggled with finding time to work on my thesis, and I did not plan to include any of it in the thesis. However, nearing the end of the PhD journey, I have been able to look back over posts and have come to see it as part of the reflective process. In the excerpt from one blog post, I reflect on the 'emotional rollercoaster' of the PhD process, much like the participants did:

Now, I don't know if this is the case with all golf buggies, but ours was a left-hand drive. In Scotland, we are not familiar with being on the 'other' side. As a PhD student, it can also feel as though you've found yourself in unfamiliar territory. It stands to reason that you're unlikely to do a PhD if you've not enjoyed, or been particularly good at, studying in the past. So, when you go from being a 'good' undergraduate student to an 'average' PhD student, it can seem a little alien. A few feet down the path, however, you get used to being on the other side, and it becomes almost natural.

Being the one holding the steering wheel might seem a little scary, to begin with. Still, you're probably in a better position than those you have brought along for the ride. Your passengers have nothing other than you on which to cling. I'm not just thinking of friends and family at this point; I'm thinking of supervisors. They are the ones whose names and professional identities will be linked to yours – if you mess up, they don't look nearly as good as they look if you do well. I reckon my supervisors keep their fingers crossed a lot of the time.

Every time you get to a tricky bit, a hill that you're going up almost sideways, one wrong move could see you fall out. There's no door to keep you in, no safety net if it all goes horribly wrong. However, just as you think you'll never make it, somehow your foot goes to the floor, and you get over that hill – you might look a little bit windswept, but you made it, and now you're ready for the next one.

Figure 31 - Blog post, 'You drive me nervous', 12th March 2017